Two Cows
and a
Vanful of Smoke

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I worked for a tree surgeon, fell out of an oak tree and landed on a dog. The dog bit my leg and its owner chased me down the street with her walking stick. The next day I realized I’d lost my nerve for climbing. I’d look at a branch or a ladder or a chain saw and break into a sweat, so I told my boss I had to leave. He was a calm, good-natured man with a steel plate in his head, and on my last day he wished me luck and told me that if I ever got my nerve back I should call him. The next week I found a job on a pig farm. It was a good job, with plenty of opportunities to lean on gates and stare at fields, but I felt sorry for the pigs. They’d look at me and grunt and seemed to tell me that they needed to be free, so one evening I let six sows out and watched them disappear into a wood. They stood and blinked, did the twitchy things pigs do when they’re not sure of their luck, and then they ran. Their big arses rolled and their ears flapped, and the last time I saw them they were barrelling through the undergrowth towards a stand of ash trees. I told the farmer that it wasn’t my fault and I’d been busy in a barn, but he didn’t believe me, gave me the sack and told me that if he ever saw me on his property again he’d shoot me. And he showed me his gun. He was serious but stupid, and that made me wonder. Wonder is stronger than stupid, so I walked and didn’t go back.
At that time I was living at home, sleeping in a small bed under the eaves. There were posters of bikes on the walls, and my chest of drawers smelt of cheese. There was a worn carpet on the floor and curtains I didn’t like. The window looked out over the village green, a quiet piece of grass with gardens behind and houses beyond them. The village is called Ashbrittle, but you wouldn’t know it to see it. The houses are small, the hedges are tidy, the county border is up the road. It’s a shy place, suspicious but knowing. It thinks for itself and has its own mind and heart and even soul, and when the night comes down and the stars shine and the weary traveller is lost in the darkened lanes that echo to their own whispers, it would be easy to think that the place was watching and waiting for the best time to do something unforgivable.

In those days Dad was a gardener and handyman. He worked for six or seven people, mowing lawns, pruning shrubs, sweeping paths, growing vegetables, painting sheds, building walls and mending fences. These six or seven people all had big houses, tidy potting sheds and fast cars, and he never did anything but a good job for them. He didn’t know the Latin names of the plants he tended, but he had an instinctive and careful way of working. He drove a knackered Morris pick-up with broken suspension on the passenger side, so if you rode with him, you had to sit at a sloping angle while he compensated for the danger by leaning out of the window. He was always paid in cash, and on Friday he gave everything but twenty-five quid to Mum, who put
the rest in a biscuit tin on top of the meat safe. With hands the size of plates, boots the size of small dogs and hair sprouting out of the end of his nose, and the same jacket on his back for fifteen years, he was a no-nonsense man with a no-nonsense voice. When he said something, it stayed said, like a rock in a field, or a tree.

Mum cleaned houses. Dusting, polishing, vacuuming, putting the rubbish out, sometimes doing some shopping for a posh widow in the village who couldn’t walk more than five steps without falling over and breaking a bone. She rode a bicycle to work, an old bone-shaker with a basket and triangles of fabric over the back wheel so her skirt didn’t get caught in the spokes. She always smelt of beeswax and dust, and wore a housecoat even when she was watching the television. She was quiet and thoughtful, and never raised her voice when Grace or I came home late.

Grace, my sister, was at college in Taunton, studying to be something to do with food and cooking. Sometimes she stayed in town, but when she stayed at home she’d try out new recipes on us. There’d be beef with Guinness and prunes, chicken with apricots, pork with nuts. I once asked her why she needed to muck around with food, and she told me that if I didn’t like it I didn’t have to eat it, so I never said anything about her cooking again. She’s got a sharp tongue on her, and I prefer not to take a lashing.

So the week after I was sacked from the pig farm I sat in my bedroom, looked at the fields and trees, listened to the radio and stroked the cat. She was called Sooty, and could
be a nervous, jumpy animal, but she was good with me. I was twenty-one years old, but that’s got little to do with anything. I could have been twenty-four. It wouldn’t have made any difference to what happened. Or nineteen. Nothing would have changed. That evening, Dad came back from work and told me that Mr Evans was looking for help. His farm was a couple of miles away outside a tiny village called Stawley, above a high and narrow lane. “Labouring,” he said. “Tractoring, milking, the usual. You know how to milk?” “You know I do.” “Then go and see him. If you don’t, someone else will.”

Dad is good at the obvious. Mum is good at being less than obvious. Three hundred years ago she would have been dragged from the house, accused of cursing a crop of cabbages, tried by a mob, found guilty of everything bad that had ever happened anywhere in the parish and burned alive on the village green. Even now there are people in the village who cross the road when they see her or the cat. She was taught stuff by her mother, who was taught stuff by her mother, who was taught stuff by her mother, and so on until we don’t know who taught who what. When I say “stuff” I mean the old signs nature gives, the ones that everyone used to know but most people have forgotten. And beyond the old signs, sometimes she gets hunches – superstitious feelings, some people would say. Hunches about things that are about to happen, intuitions and insights. And beyond the insights, she sometimes does things that other people would call spells. She calls them charms. Mum has told me that she’s
seen some of the old signs in me, and I was born with a gift I don’t recognize yet. Every now and again she gives me a hint about something, an old story or the idea behind one of her charms. And although she wouldn’t tell me why she bought a calf’s heart and speared it with thorns and hid it in the chimney, before I went to see Mr Evans she said, “Put some apple pips in your shoes.” The idea is that the pips will sweat and sprout, and their sprouting will mean that your life will sprout and whatever you wish for will grow. So I did as I was told, and put the pips in my shoes and went to see Mr Evans.

He was a small man with a drooping mouth and marshed, watery eyes. His teeth were small, and he spoke slowly with a soft, slurry accent. Dad said he’d had a stroke, and that was why he was looking for a worker, but I wasn’t curious. I wanted a job. The farm was eighty-five acres of pasture and copse, a herd of Friesians, a few sheep dotted at the edges, a ramshackle collection of barns and a low, squat house with small windows and a fireplace in every room. Mr Evans lived alone in the house, and after he’d written down a list of the things I’d have to do, he pointed at a caravan in the corner of the front yard and said, “You can live there. It’s small, but it’s got a bed and a cooker.”

“Thanks.”

“If you want the job…”

“Let me have a look.”

“You do that.”

I stood in the caravan. It was small and smelt of damp wood and old apples. The windows were dirty, and the floor
was covered in dead flies. There was a sack of rotten potatoes in the place where a toilet should have been. I looked at the sack and it seeped at its corners. For no reason I thought about Christmas and a harmonica I was given when I was six. I blew it and frightened the cat into a musical panic. “I’ll need someone here day and night,” Mr Evans said. He had a polite, old-fashioned way about him, but I knew he could be strict. He liked things done his way, the way his father had done them and his grandfather before then. I thought for a couple of minutes. I wanted to leave home, so I said, “Yes, I want the job,” and he said, “Good. You can start tomorrow,” and I moved in the next day. There was no electric in the caravan, but there were gas lights that ran from a big blue bottle. They hissed when I lit them and gave off a weird smell. I brushed the floor, cleaned the windows, threw the potatoes away, and Mr Evans gave me a chemical toilet and a hose pipe. I put my radio by the bed and cleaned the cooker, then went to watch the herd being milked. They were used to Mr Evans’s hands, so I kept back and watched. He called each cow by her name – “Daisy… Florence… Jo… Fizzy…” and went through the routine with patience and care. Feeling the back of their udders, washing the teats, stroking the legs, whispering to the nervous ones. Flipping the clusters onto the teats and watching the first of the milk pulse through the line. Along the row to check the ones that were halfway done, back to the ones that were finishing. Off with the cluster, a dip of iodine and lanolin on the teats, a hand up to open the exit gate and another was in.
He listened to the radio while he worked, a music programme with old-fashioned singing, and hummed along to some of the tunes. Once or twice he stopped to rest his hands on his knees and take a breather, but that was the only time when he showed his age. The rest of the time he didn’t miss a trick. He loved his work, loved his cows, loved the sound of the milk as it pulsed through the lines to the tank, and he loved the smell of water and cattle cake. He’d almost finished when a cat came and walked down the parlour, rubbing itself against the stalls, tail quivering, head up. Mr Evans had been expecting it. “You’re late,” he said, and went to the dairy. He came back with a saucer of milk, put it on the floor by the door, and said, “Get it while it’s warm…” “That’s the most important part of this job,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“Never forget the cat.”

“Okay,” I said. “I won’t.”

When he’d finished, I washed down the stalls and the pit while he cleaned the clusters and rinsed the lines, and then he told me to follow the herd down to the pasture. Their hooves kicked up clouds of dust, and flies buzzed in their wake. The world was parched and a touch anxious, as if it were waiting for something but didn’t know whether the something was sweet, shadowy or lost between the two.

I stood and watched as the cows spread out and started to graze. The sun was setting. Rooks were clattering in a hanger, cawing from their perches and collapsed nests. Rags of black feathers, grey feet and grey beaks, the bad
birds of the trees. I like their calls, and I like the lazy way they fly for home, but I don’t like their habits. Quarrelsome and lousy, I’ve heard people say that they only breed near money. If that’s true, what were they doing in those trees? But that’s the trouble with what people say. One thing means one thing or it could mean another. I turned and walked back to the caravan, climbed onto my bike and rode to The Globe.

The Globe at Appley was a pub, but it was more like a house. You walked in the front door and into a corridor, and a fat woman with purple legs served the drinks from a hatch in the corridor. There was a bench you could sit on and a room with a dart board. She was a strict woman, and would have you out of there if you cursed God or said something about the Queen she didn’t agree with, so I bought my beer and went to sit in the porch. I’d been there half an hour when Spike turned up. He was fresh from work at the blackcurrant farm, where he’d been spraying. He smelt of chemicals and had a bad cough. He fetched a pint, drank it in gulps and closed his eyes. I’d been to school with Spike, so we’d known each other for years. I suppose that if I’d been a hare he’d have been a fox, and we’d have met in a deserted quarry to fight. I’d have tried to box, but he’d have run rings around me, over the granite slabs and back again. He was wiry and had quick eyes, like he was always expecting something to happen. The veins stuck out in his neck, and one of his ears was a bit deformed. I think it had been caught in a door when he was a kid.
That evening he was quieter than usual, thinking, in the way he does, about something stupid. He always had a scheme going, a plan to make money, an idea that would get him away from the blackcurrant farm or wherever he was working that week. “All I need is a few grand, then I’ll be out of here…” How many times have I heard that line? How many times has he decided that he could make his fortune by driving old cars to Morocco and selling them, or digging fossils out of the cliffs at Lyme, or inventing a new way to strip blackcurrants from a bush, or stealing a flock of ewes from a field on the way to Kittisford and selling them to a man he says he knows in Wales? I don’t think he knows anyone in Wales, but there’s always a chance. Me? I know no one in Wales, and even if I did I wouldn’t sell him a ewe, a lamb, a cow or a pig. Me, I don’t have any schemes. I was quite happy to do my work and go back to the caravan and stare out of the window and dream.

“What you thinking about, Spike?”

“This and that.” He rolled a cigarette, lit it and watched the end glow. He blew smoke at me. I turned away and, as I did, a man and a woman on bicycles appeared. They were wearing matching jackets and had busy-looking bikes with canvas satchels, flashes and clips. They looked up at the pub sign, and the man said, “Fancy one?”

“Okay,” said the woman, and after they’d parked their bikes they asked to be excused as they passed us and went into the pub.

When they were inside, Spike said, “El?”
“What? I said.
“Can you keep a secret?”
“That depends. What is it?”
“Well, I don’t know if it’s a real secret. Not yet, anyway. But I saw something today.”
“You saw something?”
“Yes.”
“What?”
“The boss and I had to go to Clayhanger. He wanted me to drive a tractor back from old Harris’s. You know the place?”
“Harris at Moat Farm?”
“That’s it. So we were up there, and after the boss dropped me off I drove back along this track that goes around behind Heniton Hill.”
“That’s just up from us.”
“I know.” He looked into his drink. “So as I’m driving along, the tractor stops. Stalled, it did, so I get down and I’m trying to crank it up again when I see this bloke I haven’t seen before. And I know most people round here…”
“So?”
“He was walking through the trees with tools over his shoulder.”
“Tools?”
“Yeah. A hoe and rake. Long-handled. Looked like he knows where he’s going.”
“And did he?”
“What?”
“Know where he was going?”
“I reckon he did, but it didn’t bother him. I had work to do. I got the tractor going and drove back, but all afternoon, you know, I was thinking about him. Fucking beast of a bloke. And there was something odd. Like he didn’t belong there, I suppose.”

“And that’s the secret?”

“No. There’s more…” Spike finished his drink and I finished mine. “Want another?”

“Okay,” and while he went inside, I listened to the sounds of the dying day and the bleating of sheep in a field on the other side of the road. There was a heat in the evening that wouldn’t let the day go. I heard the landlady scolding someone for talking about politics. I listened for a moment, then stood up, strolled into the lane and stared at the hedge. Spike came back with two pints and we climbed up the bank behind the pub and sat at a table.

“So,” I said. “There you are. Under Heniton Hill…”

“Yeah. Went back, didn’t I? Went back this evening. Had a little snoop.”

“Nothing you like more.”

He looked at me, and for a moment I thought he was going to hit me. He’s not the sort of bloke who’ll let you take the piss. He’s got a short temper, and although he’d always come back and apologize if he did hit you, the risk isn’t worth taking. He’s got a punch like a whip, and he’d never leave you with just one.

“Of course…” And he said he’d parked in a lay-by and strolled down to where he’d seen the stranger in the trees.
He had a story ready. Spike always has a story ready, and if anyone wanted to know what he was doing he was going to say something about a couple of ewes escaping from his boss’s field and ask, “Have you seen ’em? I saw them heading this way.”

So he went into the trees, found the path the stranger had followed and walked for half a mile. He crossed a small stone bridge over a stream and came to a fork in the path. One way climbed towards a distant house, the other dropped further into the woods. “It was weird down there,” he said. “I didn’t hear any birds, no wind, no nothing. It was as quiet as the grave, you know. All I could hear was my breathing and my footsteps. The path got narrower and narrower. It looked like it was a secret, but still it was used a lot. I was just starting to think that I should turn around and go back when I heard something.”

“What?”

Spike put a finger to his lips and lowered his voice. “I crouched down and looked down the path. It finished in a clearing. The bloke I’d seen the day before was there, standing in front of a hoop house.”

“A hoop house? Like a plastic greenhouse?”

“Yes.”

“What’s he doing with a hoop house?”

“Fuck knows,” said Spike, “but that’s what we’ve got to find out. He dived inside and I came back. I don’t know. I didn’t want to hang around on my own. He looked like he could be a bit useful.”

“A bit useful?”

“Oh yes.”
“And we’ve got to find out?”
“Of course.”
“Why?”
“Because…”
“We’ve got to find out what some ape is doing in a hoop house in the middle of the woods…”
“I never said he was an ape.”
“But you said he was useful.”
“I can handle useful…”
There’s no point in arguing with Spike when he’s in one of these moods. It’s best to let him go with it, so I sat back and listened while he told me that we were going to find out exactly what some bloke was doing in a hoop house in the middle of the woods.
“We?”
“You owe me, El.”
This was true. Earlier in the year we’d been drinking in Wellington, and I’d told someone in the pub that he was talking crap about the beer I was drinking. He said it tasted like piss, and I said the thing about crap. Sometimes I do speak my mind, but Spike lets his fists speak his mind, which is, when it’s not planning some madness, usually idling in neutral. When the someone said, “You want to say that again?” I said, “Okay,” and did. Spike was the other side of the bar, but he can sense trouble even if it’s taking a day off in Minehead. “You okay?” he said, suddenly next to me with an empty glass in one hand and the other in his pocket. He looked very relaxed.
“Yeah,” I said.
“This your mate?” he said, and the bloke who thought my beer was piss took a step back.
“We were just talking about beer…” I said.
“And you can’t fight your own corner?” said the bloke.
“Did you say fight?” said Spike, and before I could stop him he’d spun the bloke around and was pushing him towards the door. I didn’t see what happened next, but by the time I was outside the bloke was lying on the floor and Spike was rubbing his fist. “Want another?” he said.

The bloke shook his head.
“I’m ready.”
“Forget it.”
“Forget it?”
“Yeah.”

This wasn’t the only time Spike had stepped in for me. There was the time at Appley Fair when someone said I was looking at his woman, and the time someone’s sister asked me if I liked parsnips and I said I hated them. If you asked me why he does it I suppose I’d have to say that we make some sort of partnership, like in a film about opposites walking across a desert to find hidden treasure. He’s the bloke who never quite gets it, and I’m the one who thinks before he does anything. He goes, I wait. He tells, I ask. He grinds his teeth, I brush mine. I ride a Honda 250, which is half-bike, half-horse. He drives a van with a loud tape deck and a steering wheel the size of a small dish. He meets girls, spends a weekend or two with them, tells them that he’s bored and finds another.
I look at girls and wonder if I can open my mouth before I start dribbling. When I look at him I’m pleased he’s my mate and we’ve managed to get this far together.

“Sometimes,” he said, “when I look at you I wonder if you’ve got any balls at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I fucking mean.”

“No I don’t.”

“And I was thinking…”

“Thinking what?”

“When do you want to do this?”

“Do what?”

“You know what. Find out what that bloke’s up to.”

“I don’t know.”

“Tonight,” he said. “I’m going up there tonight.”

“Tonight?” I said, and as the word dropped, I heard a distant croak, the call of a single raven. The big bird, the black bird, the one my mother tells me to watch for. He used to have white feathers, but he stole the sun, and that’s why his feathers are black. And when he flies he leaves scars in the clouds. “Beware,” I whispered. “Be careful.”

“Of what?”

“The raven.”

“You fucking weirdo,” said Spike, and then, “you coming or you going to be a chicken for the rest of your life?”

“Okay,” I said, “but let’s be careful.”

“Aren’t I always?”

I said nothing.
The summer had been mad. It had been like a badger caught in a tarred barrel, fed on chilli and forced to listen to chanting monks. Later, when the records were examined and weathermen met to drink glasses of lemonade and talk about their business, they would say that 1976 had been Britain’s longest, hottest summer ever. And they meant it. Day after day after day the sun shone in deep blue skies and baked the land dry. It was hot before it rose, and when it rose it laughed at the country. On the moors and heaths, fires broke out and frightened animals from their holes. Trees were burned to sticks, lakes dried, bushes exploded, crops failed. In other places tarmac melted and birds failed in their flight. Hosepipes were banned, stand-pipes were used, wells and springs dried up. Politicians told us to share bath water. Ashbrittle wheezed and sweated, and in the middle of the day, dogs collapsed in the road and refused to move. The green browned and yellowed, and flowers withered. Cows lay in the shade of trees, horses panted, fish died and floated in rivers that turned to drains. Every day people would stand in their gardens and stare at their parched vegetables and search the sky for rain. Sometimes a single cloud would appear and float slowly over the village, but it was always a single cloud, white and fluffy – and nothing. And as it disappeared over the
horizon, the people would shake their heads and go back inside and do whatever they had to do.

One day I was out walking and found a dead rabbit in a field below the church. I don’t know why it had died, but there it was, dried to a crisp beneath a tree, flat as a postcard, lying in the cover of the exposed roots. I picked it up and held it in front of me. It didn’t bend and it didn’t smell, and I thought about taking it home and propping it against the wall outside the kitchen. There was a hole where one of its eyes had been, and its mouth had contorted into a manic grin. It would have confused the cat, so I didn’t take it home, but the thought was there, a dry thought that walked with the weather and sun.

The days boiled, and at night the heat thickened and dripped. People lay naked under single sheets, windows open, curtains open. Sleep came in fits, and the dreams that followed the fits were filled with water and cool winds. Mr Evans’s caravan, my caravan, was hotter than a threat, and when I went to bed sweat crawled over my skin. It dribbled and gnashed and left its marks in my creases, and whispered fumes in my ear. The walls and roof of the van squeaked and groaned, exhausted flies buzzed and banged against the windows, mosquitoes whined and bit.

When Spike and I left the pub, we stood in the heat of the evening and wondered if the weather would ever change. I said that I thought it had stuck and we were stuck with it, and there was nothing we could do. Spike said I was talking bollocks. I told him that my bollocks was no more bollocks
than his bollocks, and we arranged to meet at half nine in
the lay-by under Heniton Hill.

I rode up to see Mum and Dad, taking the right at Appley
school and into the wooded valley at Tracebridge. In the old
days, a witch used to live in a wattle hut by the river bridge
at Tracebridge and demand payment from passing travellers.
She’d curse and rave and shake her clawed fists, and if they
didn’t give her a coin they’d never get up the hill. Their legs
would seize and their eyes would tear, or their horses would
stop and refuse to go any further, or a wheel would fall off
their cart, roll over the bridge and fall into the river. When
she was bored and there were no passing travellers, she’d
turn herself into a weasel and steal chickens from farms.
Old and cruel and vindictive, she’d eat the chicken raw and
hang its sucked bones around her neck. The witch is dead
now, and her hut was burnt to the ground by relieved carters,
but there’s the sense of something by the bridge, a waiting
malevolence in the air that stops dogs and freezes rabbits. I
rode by with my head down, didn’t glance in the direction
of the place where the hut used to stand, accelerated for the
long drag up the hill to Ashbrittle, and sat back on the bike
when I reached the top.

Mum was ironing shirts and Dad was dribbling wash-
ing up water onto the lettuce in the garden. I stood at the
front-room window and looked out. A hippy was standing
on the green, her head tipped back, staring at the sky. She
was wearing a spotted scarf on her head, baggy shorts,
a tiny t-shirt and sandals. The hippies lived in the Pump
Court cottages by the bakery. I call them hippies because everyone else does, but that’s the only reason. They could have been called something else, but they weren’t. I suppose it helps to give people names and put them in groups; it means you can feel safe and know where you and they stand. Sometimes Spike and I would go up and stand behind the hedge and watch them, but we never saw them do anything very interesting. They never took all their clothes off and rolled in mud. They never sat in circles and played guitars. They never walked out in the middle of the night and sang to the stars, and they never had crazed parties that lasted all night. They were quiet people and although we wished they would do shocking things they never did, so Spike and I would go and find something else to watch or do. Not that there’s a lot of something else to do in Ashbrittle. A vicar closed all the pubs down years ago, there’s no shop and no bus stop. There is a phone box, and anyone can spend half an hour in there, or you can read the notices for things on the notice board outside the village hall. These things are usually to do with coffee mornings or jumble sales or the mobile library, and although the village is famous for a few things, you never see them mentioned on the notice board.

One thing Ashbrittle is famous for is the yew in the churchyard. The tree grows from a small burial mound, and some people say it’s the oldest living thing in the country. It was a thousand years old when Jesus was born, and it’s collected more memories and ideas than any living thing on earth. It’s broad and green and split, and its trunks are cracked.
It’s been home to millions of insects and birds and squirrels, and the patch of ground beneath its branches is pale and soft. I know old men who bow to the yew, and women who touch the hems of their skirts as they pass. The old traditions might be dying and the old memories fade, but that’s all they do. They still echo in the air, like the ghosts of flags.

Another thing the village is remembered for is the story of Professor Hunt and his skin experiments with a woman he kidnapped and kept in a run-down farmhouse beyond Marcombe Lake. The house is a ruin now, but the place has a haunted air to it, and when we were kids we’d dare each other to go down there and spend an hour alone in the shade of the broken walls. We imagined that they sighed and moaned at our passing, and held secrets we couldn’t even imagine. And when we were kids, imagination was fruit to us, sweet and juicy and ripe.

If you haven’t heard of the yew or Professor Hunt, you might have heard of Lord Buff-Orpington. His family used to own almost all the houses in the village and most of the land, and although the estate has now been reduced to a few fields and Belmont Hall, older people still doff their hats to him and stand back to let him pass. He I don’t know how old he is, maybe eighty, but he doesn’t look it, and he never acts the Lord. There are rumours about him, rumours that he is a man of few morals and has even committed murder, but I don’t know if I believe them. Rumours are just that, and he’s always seemed okay to me. I’ve spoken to him a few times, and he always says hello first, asks if my work is
going well and tells me to give his best to Mum and Dad. I don’t suppose it’s his fault that he’s a Lord, and I think he’s always done his best for the village, but maybe he hasn’t. I don’t know. I can’t tell. That’s not my job.

He once wrote a memoir, the story of his life and the story of his family. He called it a confession, and it was a best-selling book, a book of history, love, troubles and family, and when Mum borrowed it from the travelling library she finished it quickly and let me read it before she took it back. It was divided into chapters that didn’t appear to be related to each other, and these were given titles like ‘Gardeners’ ‘The Fondue’ and ‘The Village Fête’. There was a chapter entitled ‘Mother’ that stuck in my mind, and although it was tragic, it made me laugh. I suppose that might be one of the secrets of good writing; make sure it swings like a pendulum in a storm. So this chapter started like this:

My mother, Lady Patricia Buff-Orpington, was born a Stafford-Heinz. Her father was a personal friend of Edward Elgar, and believed she had made a good match, but her mother threatened to shoot my father with her cousin’s revolver because he wasn’t from Worcestershire. My one regret is that I never met my maternal grandmother. She was killed in a freak heron-baiting incident five weeks before my birth, but if I’d had the pleasure, my pleasure would have been to stick a fork in her ear. By all accounts she was an objectionable snob of a woman, and deserved to die impaled on the beak of an angered ardea cinerea.
“So the mother the devil, the daughter the angel. My mother was a saint, a courtesan of the soul, the sort of person who made lover’s lane safe for lovers. I keep her picture by my bed, and when I look at it, this is what I see: she is sitting on a gilded chair beside my father. He is standing with his right hand tucked into his waistcoat, and although he cuts a handsome and distinguished figure, he’s a shadow beside her. The photograph was taken in 1932, and she stares with sharp lips and an intelligence that left half her suitors gibbering. The rest simply gave up, apart from father, who was made of sterner stuff. He would not be put off. He determined to marry the most beautiful woman he had ever met, and after two and a half years of intense pursuit that involved both sidling and the use of landaus, he won her.

There was a time when I thought I could go to university and become the sort of person who could write like this and talk about stuff on the radio, and although the time didn’t last long, it was real enough. The idea was born from reading National Geographic magazines, Haynes car manuals, atlases, bird-watching manuals, Grace’s cook books and novels from the travelling library. And when I read Lord Buff-Orpington’s memoir, I was inspired. Inspired to be more than who I was born to be, inspired to see the world, inspired to get my own place. I just never thought it would be a caravan in a farmyard.

I think Mum was sad I’d moved out, and said she couldn’t believe a caravan in a farmyard would be more comfortable
than my own room. And she said, “I smelt fire in the air this morning, but no one was burning anything.” She rubbed her eyes. “Be careful.”

“Of what?”

“I couldn’t tell. But you know what smelling fire means.”

“Of course,” I said. In her world it means trouble, madness or danger. “And I’m always careful.”

“Are you?”

“Yes Mum.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” and she kissed me and ruffled my hair and went back to her cooking. I went to sit on the wall and watch Dad work, and he said that he didn’t think the weather was going to break soon, and the way the birds were behaving told him they were in for a hungry autumn and a long winter. They weren’t singing as loudly as they usually did, and they weren’t flying as madly. He asked me if I was staying for tea, but I said I had to go back to the farm.

“Everything going okay down there?”

“Yes thanks.”

“Evans treating you all right?”

“Yes. He’s a good bloke. Doesn’t say a lot, but then I don’t suppose he has to.”

“Good,” he said, and after I’d watched him for a little longer I headed off to meet Spike. I waited for ten minutes, and when he turned up he parked the van in the verge, said, “Ready?” and we headed into the trees.

The path was exactly as he’d described it and, when we reached the bridge and the stream, he stopped and cocked