

Country life

I'M LUCKY enough to live in small cottage beside a tributary of the River Eade, far, far, far, as they say, from the madding crowd. When our mother followed our father to the grave, she bequeathed us her last home. My brother and sister, who much prefer life among that madding crowd, agreed to sell me their share. The wife who came with me when I moved down from The Smoke soon decided she, too, preferred city grime and traffic noise to honest country mud and bird song. She packed her bags and left. As it happens, I soon formed in intimate friendship with the wife of a wealthy local homosexual. Linda made it clear she was more attracted to his money than to divorce and a new marriage, but was otherwise willing to partner me. So I am not without the pleasure of a woman's charms, and although my heart was bruised by my wife's desertion, grief did not linger.

My luck held up, too, in other ways. In the city I'd fallen into working as a jobbing journalist, supplying however many words were demanded by whatever magazine was paying for them, and I edited similar copy provided by other hacks. When I bought out my brother and sister, I realised that modern technology would let me carry on in that line of work from home. I shall never become as well-off as Linda's gay husband, but I earn enough to pay the bills and live in comfort. Linda stays over on most nights and we wake up to fresh air and the twitter of birds. In short, I have the kind of life many city folk insist they'd give their eye teeth to live.

Now and then many such city folk arrive to settle, but few stay long. They often buy a converted barn for which they pay too much, or acquire some rural dereliction with brave plans to 'do it up'. All, I find, have odd notions of country life. They proclaim in a loud voice how they will become 'a part of the community' and how they cannot believe they 'finally got away from it all'. But winter down here on the levels is dank and dark, and the second winter sees off many incomers. The third weeds out the stragglers. They hasten back to the city, a fair bit poorer after selling up at a loss, but a lot wiser. I have known only two who did settle.

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One I'll call John, as that's his given name, but I shall not identify him further. He is still well-known, and his reason for joining us here out west was a matter of life and death. He became a good friend.

John was not one of those boring city loudmouths who turn up after watching one too many silly TV documentaries. At first he kept to himself, but once he had got to know and trust me, he told me why he'd had to leave his former life. It was, he said, because he did not want to die an early death. I thought he was being dramatic, and said so, but when he told me more, I knew he wasn't.

I did not recognise John the first time I met him, but village talk soon came my way and the penny dropped when we met again a few days later. John had been the bass player in a successful punk band many years ago, and although the chart-topping days were long over, the band had carried on making a good living touring Europe on the nostalgia circuit, playing old hits and new songs to ever loyal and ever older fans.

In the late 1990s, one of their former hits was used on the soundtrack of a blockbuster, and the band's fortunes got a substantial boost. Work had never flagged, but now the band gained a younger generation of fans and the touring carried on, even taking in several gigs in the United States. By then only John and the singer remained of the original line-up. Drummers, guitarists and keyboard players were hired as and when they went on tour or into the studio to record more music. Those musos were on a fixed wage, so John and the singer took the profits and did well. The problem was that John and the singer both had a bad, bad habit, and crack cocaine and heroin was soon soaking up most of their money.

Linda and I often had John in for supper, and he was always reluctant to discuss his old life, but one night he told us how he had come to move to the levels.

'I was drinking loads in those days, loads and loads, port and brandy, but I didn't touch anything harder than blow for a long time, I'd seen too many good mates die and believe me it's not cool whatever the kids think. Then Mick got me into crack and later H. I still can't remember how or why, or why I was so stupid.'

But he had been.

John became a high-functioning junkie and his life carried on as before. His younger half-brother saved him. His younger brother was a lawyer and growing up had idolised John. He stepped in when John was beaten up by a dealer and spent a week in hospital. He persuaded John to leave the band, get into rehab and let him sort out John's business affairs and money woes. Tears came to John's eyes when he told us.

‘If it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t be here now. Honestly, I wouldn’t.’

Oh, the irony of that last admission.

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John settled in well. As a minor celebrity he agreed to hand out prizes at local festivals. His regular royalties meant he no longer had to earn a living, and his time was his own. My hack writing allowed me to work when I wanted to, so we saw a lot of each other. Getting on with John was like falling off a log. He installed a small recording studio in an outhouse and allowed local wannabe rock stars to record there, producing and engineering them for free. He took up with Linda’s sister who had recently been widowed and told me she was moving in with him once she had sold her house in Cheshire. Life was sweet. But all that changed in an instant.

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John came to the cottage early one afternoon and was upset. Something had shaken him up, but at first he wouldn’t tell me what and we just talked of this and that until I decided to force the issue.

‘What’s wrong, John?’

For a moment he said nothing, and it was well over a minute before he spoke.

‘Bloody Mick’s been on the phone. I don’t know how he got my number.’

‘So?’

‘So he wants to tour again.’

‘But you don’t want to.’

‘Too bloody right I don’t want to! It almost killed me last time and . . .’

‘Surely you can stay away from crack?’

‘Yeah, right.’

‘Just tell him you don’t want to.’

‘Yeah, right.’

'You don't have to if you don't want to.'

'Mick's lost all his money.'

'That's not your problem, it is?'

'That's why he needs to tour again.'

'But you don't want to, so don't.'

'It's not that simple.'

'Why not? I didn't get the impression you two were still bosom buddies.'

We're not. But you don't know Mick.'

'What do you mean?'

'He said if I didn't go on tour again so he could make some money he's . . .'

John paused.

'He's what?'

'He said he's going to kill me.'

'Ah, come on, that's all talk.'

'You don't know Mick.'

'Seriously?'

'When Mick is up there, he's sky-high and he'll do anything. Anything. And he's up there all the time. He was up there when he rang, I could tell.'

'I thought you said he was penniless?'

'He is. He's been borrowing money to get his gear. And he's not yet paid any back. He reckons if he can organise a tour, they'll lay off for a while knowing that they'll get their money back.'

'John, I know this is easy to say but difficult for you, but it isn't your problem.'

John said nothing.

'Tell the cops about the phone call. At least they'll know.'

'How's that going to help?'

'He made a death threat.'

‘He’s made them loads of times, no one takes him seriously. They all just think he’s a junkie talking through his arse. Which he is, but this is different. He’s scared. He really needs to make some money.’

‘But he’s not going to kill you if you don’t go on tour?’

‘I don’t know, probably not. It’s just all just the crack talking.’

‘Of course it is.’

‘I mean if he kills me that rather spoils his plan to make some more dough going on tour.’

‘Exactly.’

He laughed.

‘And I really don’t want to do it, I really don’t. Not any more, not at my age, I mean what’s the bloody point. I just don’t need it. I’ve not felt this good in years, I like it down here, things are working out, Cherry’s moving in, life’s sweet, really sweet.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Thing is, you don’t know Mick.’

‘Don’t worry, John, you’ll be fine.’

‘He’ll do anything when he’s high. Anything.’

‘John don’t worry, it’ll all blow over.’

‘You think?’

‘Of course it will. These things always do.’

‘Thing is, you don’t know Mick.’

No, I didn’t know Mick. But I met him two days later.

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Linda had already gone upstairs and I was tidying up. It was almost midnight. John rang me. He was very scared.

‘Come round, please, as soon as you can!’

‘What’s up!’

‘Please, just come round, now, I need someone here.’ He hung up.

It took me about ten minutes to walk up the lane to John’s cottage. Outside was parked an expensive, though very shabby Mercedes. The front door was open, and I heard John and another man yelling at each other. John shouted:

‘No, I’m bloody not, Mick, ever, it’s over, it’s bloody over, all of it, that’s it, I can’t go back to all that and I’m not going to.’

The other man shouted back

‘You’ll bloody tour again if I say so, you little creep.’

I walked in.

‘Who the fuck are you?’ the other man shouted at me.

‘He’s a friend, Mick, I asked him to come round.’

‘Well, he can fuck right off again, come on, you, get out!’

He raised his arm and pointed an pistol at me. His hair was lank, he was very pale and sweating, and his pupils were wide as saucers.

‘Mick, don’t do . . . ‘

‘Shut the fuck up!’

‘Mick!’

‘Shut up, John!’

To me:

‘You, out! Get the fuck out of here. Out.’

‘He’s staying!’

‘He’s not fucking staying.’

‘What’s going on?’

‘Never you fucking mind, get out, now!’

He walked towards me with his arm outstretched pointing the gun at me.

‘You deaf?’

Behind him John went to grab him, but the singer turned around.

‘Oh, that’s nice, you always were a devious cunt, John, always, always trouble.’ Then he shot John in the face at point-blank range. John crumpled to the floor, a big hole in the back of his head oozing blood.

‘Oh, Jesus, Jesus, fuck, fuck, oh, Christ!’ said Mick, but those were his last words. He’d forgotten about me. He stuck the barrel of the automatic in his mouth and pulled the trigger. That was him dead, too.

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I liked John. I’d only known him for a year, but I liked him. He was honest and good company, and I was pleased that he’d finally broken free and started a new life. As for all those other morons who turn up here looking to ‘get away from it all’ . . .