



PROLOGUE

THE PLACE WAS LONG FORGOTTEN. Whatever claims it had once had to commerce and industry were surrendering beneath a sheath of vegetation. Here and there, the skeleton of a walkway appeared beneath the fleshy leaves of stonecrop or a crumbling kiln emerged from ferns, but the site was slowly being consumed by undergrowth. I was glad I was with my friend Will. It was raining and the dark tangle of blackthorn hung with raindrops, catching the light of a wet summer's day as they fell, disappearing into puddles on the concrete. In the distance we could hear the mosquito whine of mopeds, and pockets of human detritus showed that we were not entirely alone.

This place was not Will's natural territory. He was from a well-to-do village outside Canterbury. He had not been brought up in a world of landfill sites and scrublands as I had – half places, not the countryside, not quite human owned. Will had brought me here to show me the island. The River Medway, carving in a loop around the edge of the site, had left behind an isolated hummock of land.

'Untouched for hundreds of years,' he said excitedly.

Will was a writer of spooky horror stories. He imagined lost civilisations on the island. It was an enticing thought, but what had really sparked my interest was the bit of information that Will had casually mentioned as an afterthought.

‘A woman is living on a houseboat in the creek. I reckon she’s been there for years and no one knows.’

We found the houseboat, but some local teenagers had got there first. The person who had lived in this semi-wilderness had suddenly abandoned her home. It was a sorry sight. The contents of the boat had been strewn around the surrounding land, the windows of the wheelhouse were broken, the rain was soaking the jumble of bed linen, and clothes and utensils lay scattered on the floor. It was not a picturesque retreat, rather a scene of squalor.

Will hung back. Around us the knot of vegetation dripped and rain hissed on the grey river, but still I was drawn to it. Still, after all these years when I had thought I had settled down and no longer needed this life. When I thought I had accepted the bricks and mortar and mortgage, and had rid myself of the thing which had made me feel trapped by them. Still, I wanted to reach out and touch this place and make contact with the person who had lived here and ask, why? Why did you choose this life? Why shun the twenty-first century and choose to live in a houseboat hidden away on a back creek of the Medway?

‘Hello,’ I called out.

Will stepped back.

Slowly, I approached the boat, picking my way through the scattered belongings, expecting a Doberman to come charging towards us having slipped its chain or, worse, some scraggly haired woman who had lost the art of greeting visitors. There was a gangplank leading onto the boat; I walked towards it.

‘I wouldn’t,’ Will said.

I stepped on board and looked down into the hull. Black mud filled the boat; a trip into that world would be a hellish end.

I walked the length of the deck while Will hovered on shore. The dock wall, which would once have been busy with barges delivering raw materials to the workers, bent away, capped by an impenetrable barrier of blackthorn. Opposite the boat, the island that Will had wanted to show me hid the boat from the main river. The light of the open river glowed in the distance. Out there, pleasure boats

passed, riverside flats were developed, roads were ever-widened and no one knew of this boat tucked away. For a moment I entertained a fantasy of taking it over while its owner was gone: tidying the place up, installing the guard dog to keep the kids away, coming here to write and regain what I had lost when I had finally been evicted from my home on the marshes.

The caravan on the north Kent marshes, which I had lived in six years previously, had been the last in a line of inside/outside dwellings which I'd occupied since I was nineteen. Back then, I had spent my summer volunteering in Canada, renovating houses for Native American families and living by a lake in Northern Ontario in a trailer tent which had no running water or electricity.

I loved the simplicity of this world with nothing but the essentials. I loved that I had everything I needed for a happy life: food, shelter, company, things to read and things to write on and no extras. I loved having a lake as my bath tub and washing machine. I was amazed afresh each morning, as I stepped from the trailer, that I was living in a clearing in the Canadian woods. Living in this way you were never really inside. There was always the smell of the trees, the scratching of branches on the canvas and at night the clamorous racket of bullfrogs and whippoorwills and parties of wolves howling down from the hills.

Something clicked into place within me that summer. I felt a rightness, a wholeness, as if my whole life until this point had been out of sync and suddenly I had fallen into step with a person who had always been walking alongside me, just out of reach.

When, inevitably, I returned to England out of duty to my parents and the belief that I had to be sensible, I found that I hated all the trappings of modern urban life. I couldn't get used to carpets and curtains and turning on light switches.

I got over it of course; after all, I was only nineteen, and my passions and energies ran off in new areas. I went to university, met a boy and, afterwards, got a job with a wildlife charity and moved into a flat with the same boy. Or, you could say, I got on

with things rather than got over it; the truth was I never stopped searching for the feeling I had that summer.

The caravan on the north Kent marshes was a flash of inspiration. In 2004, I had been offered a job with the RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) in Kent and had nowhere to live. Connor, the boy I'd met at university, was in London studying to be a teacher and this move would be on my own. My new boss, AJ, suggested I move into the farmhouse occupied by the two wardens, guys in their forties who had lived in the house together for a LONG time. I had lived in enough shared houses to imagine the scenes of washing up in the sink and wet towels in the bathroom. It didn't appeal. I saw my opportunity.

'Is there any chance I could bring a caravan to the reserve and live in that?' I suggested. I thought I was being cheeky but, with no one but myself to please, I realised that this was a chance to regain, if only for a while, the life I really wanted and, after all, my new boss could only say no.

AJ was a laid-back guy with a philosophy of 'if you're happy, I'm happy'.

'I can't see any reason why not,' he said. 'One of the digger drivers lives in a caravan on site during the week. I'm sure we could find room for another.'

He hadn't quite bargained on the thirty-foot Steeple Oaklands static caravan bought from a site in Jaywick-on-Sea and chosen for its 1970s wood-panelled dining area and extra-large living room (which I figured would make an excellent dance space).

AJ took it well. We parked the caravan under the willow tree in the garden of the farmhouse and connected the electrics and plumbing. With no option for waste disposal, I bought a caravan portaloo and pickaxed my own drains for the sink and shower. At £3,000, I worked out that if I only managed to live in it for six months, I would make my money back on the caravan with the saving on rent.

But those first six months were harder than I had imagined. The marshes seemed oppressive: a vast, bleak flatness with nowhere to

hide. My new colleagues appeared silent and serious and, for hours each day, I was stuck on my own while they went out to do ‘men’s’ jobs on the reserve, leaving me to answer the phone and work on the computer. Everyone I loved seemed to be on the other side of the water. One evening, in the autumn twilight, I walked up the hill, which was the epicentre of the reserve, and looked out across the Thames twisting away towards London where Connor was living. There, on the opposite bank, across the churning, mud-coloured river, were the blue hills of Essex, my much maligned home county.

The marshes on that side of the river appeared blighted by oil-storage depots and industry, but across the river were also my family and childhood friends. Just a boat ride would get me there. To have that offer of warmth and company so close made the loneliness more acute. The eye of the marshes glared at me, the grazing meadows appeared harsh and scruffy and the wind pouring out of the North Sea battered everything which dared to stand upright in this land of flatness. Down on the fields, great, black gangs of crows bustled together, waiting for a signal from the light and the season, before making their move into the wood where they roosted in their thousands. Six curlews flew across the sky and the silhouettes of fieldfares and redwings plummeted into the valley. Blackbirds chinked metallicly, sounding too much like the computer I had sat at all day. It was not a comforting, friendly landscape. In the openness of the marshes there is nowhere to hide from yourself.

I disguised my unhappiness and dislike of the place well. Local people I met through work would say ‘I can see you’re in love with this place’.

But I wasn’t, not at all.

Caravan living was also proving difficult. My summer by the lake in Canada had not prepared me for winter on the marshes. Living in a metal box in winter is cold. The water in my washing-up bowl froze; my house plants died of frost damage. The electricity blanked out in every storm, forcing me to fight my way across the lawn to the farmhouse and rouse the ever sleepy wardens into letting me in to fiddle with the fuses. Mice invaded

through microscopic holes and lived on a diet of food labels, while shredding my clothes for their nests.

By the end of the winter I had earned the grudging respect of my colleagues and I began to see moments when, if only I could get on top of all the problems and breakdowns, maybe that feeling I had once had in Canada could also be found here.

One morning, I snuggled under the blankets on my bed and read *Great Expectations* as fog wrapped around the caravan and muffled the sound of fog horns blowing out on the river. Even in the twenty-first century, the marshes were still a place of mystery. You walked through the villages and had the feeling that things were going on behind closed doors. The packed pews of the churches contrasted with rumours of swingers' clubs in the villages. It was a place where Halloween was frowned upon, but riots took place at the village fete. It was an area where the ghosts of the past were close beside you, where the remnants of shepherds' cottages rubbed up against the lights of the oil refinery.

The estuary had begun to seep into my pores and I realised that beauty could be found here if you looked for it. There were the twisting rivulets which wound their way out across the vast muddy bays as the water made its way to the sea; container ships that seemed to float across the land as they sailed on the hidden river. Beauty was in the boundless sky and private chatterings of rooks gliding across it, in the bubbling aria of a curlew, in the sound of church bells coming across the water from Essex, amplified by the river fog.

To many this was a wasteland, not an area of outstanding natural beauty, but a landscape where man had seen a blank canvas to dump unsightly industry. The remnants of these industries littered the bays: bawley boats rotting in creeks, cranes collapsing into old gravel pits, forts lost and lonely on islands. The estuary had sucked these human fingerprints in the mud. Broken houses and sheepfolds, whole villages had been whipped into submission by the wind from the sea. 'Bring it on,' the estuary seemed to challenge, 'I will take you too'. The estuary was a rough-edged beauty, but it

had begun to get under my skin. Six months passed. I survived the winter. Spring came and I stayed.

At the end of the first year I knew I did not want to leave my life on the marshes for a tiny flat or house with a postage-stamp garden close to Connor's new teaching post in Essex.

'Move into the caravan.' I urged him. 'Just for now. It's rent free. We can save for a deposit.'

It was all very logical, to me. Connor saw through it.

'I want to get on with life,' he said. 'Not waste my time with these ideas of living in a shack with no conveniences.'

I knew this. Connor had spent the last year training for a sensible job. I could feel the life he wanted descending on me and, like a rabbit waiting for the blow of an onrushing truck, I was frozen, unable to think of what to do. I kept pretending that it was what I wanted too.

In the end we settled for an uneasy compromise. Connor moved into the caravan but decked it with technology, iPods, laptop, Freeview TV. It made neither of us happy.

By the time of the eviction, two years later, I was holding on too tight, resisting the urge to get a mortgage and buy a house with Connor, resisting changing a job which had stagnated, resisting moving on in life at all because of the caravan, because I wanted the life under the willow tree, a life of little owls yodelling love sonnets outside my window, and mice living in the flowerpots outside my door. The life of lying in bed on an autumn morning with the blackberries ripe in the hedgerow and the willowherb flaming on the reserve, watching the rooks and jackdaws skydance across the fields, battling the wind, revelling in the joy of flight. Cracks were appearing all around – in my job, in my relationship – but I was clinging to the caravan as if it were a lifebelt keeping me afloat.

Clinging to anything this tightly is never good. The eviction happened. But it was in those last few weeks that I discovered that I was not alone in wanting a life close to nature, with few possessions.

The caravan was advertised for sale and people came to visit. There was an ex-traveller who gave me advice on avoiding planning

permission, a houseboat owner who let me spend a weekend living aboard her boat while I considered new places to live, the warden of the nearby reserve who lived in a condemned house on the marshes of Sheppey, a former scrap-metal dealer turned sheep farmer who eventually bought the caravan for his daughter to live in. The estuary, it seemed, had become a shelter for these people, and I began to wonder if the two were linked: the landscape in its unconventional beauty, and the people it attracted. Did this landscape, which continued to defy the modern world, attract people who also resisted the urge to be tamed?

Now, with that whole world of the caravan on the marshes swept away, I notice them still. These people. These dwellings. The little huts and houseboats, the caravans and chalets, the people who are still hiding out in the creeks and bays of the estuary.

As I stood on the deck of the wrecked houseboat, with Will pacing on shore, I realised that here had lived another renegade, trying to live in a way contrary to the expected norm, and I had missed my chance to ask her why? This woman would not be returning to her home. Her home would soon go the way of my own and I feared that before long things would change for us all.

In 2013, the estuary was under threat, not only from Boris Johnson's desire for another airport, but from the Lower Thames Crossing and housing estates which threatened to obliterate colonies of nightingales, and a myriad other plans to concrete over the marshes and bay with progress and growth. There was another threat that was sweeping across the marshes like sea fog: the desire to tame, to sanitise and smooth away. This creeping twenty-first-century miasma was a sickness which would wipe away the rough edges and the people hiding out here.

I wanted to understand this place before it was lost. I wanted to walk the estuary from Gravesham to Whitstable and meet some of the people bound up in it. I wanted to celebrate this world before it was gone and find out what it was that bought them here and, in doing so, I hoped to answer the endless questions within myself.

Why am I drawn to this landscape? What is it about modern 'normal' life I find so hard to reconcile with myself? And, once you are on the outside, can you ever come in again?

For the last few years, I had staunchly followed the mantra 'don't look back'. Now I wanted to walk a songline into my past, peeling back the layers to touch the places which had been important. Not to bring that life back, but to understand whom that life had formed. It was also a journey to uncover the stories of those others, those dwellers, living on the edges of the modern world; people who had chosen the estuary to create a life which meant something to them. It was their songline too, a route between plotland and boatyard, island and hermit's home, chalet and shack. By meeting these people, by putting my finger on each place, I wanted to sing this world into life. If there was a common thread, a reason that united them all, then maybe I would find it. Maybe, in finding it, I would make sense of my own story.

I saw the journey as a pilgrimage and these people as my pilgrim sites. They represented something of importance to my own beliefs, that there are more ways to live in this world than the one that society dictates is acceptable. I had made sacrifices because of this belief and now I wished to visit others who had embraced this path. Footfall after footfall, I would walk these two parallel lines between my past and those of the people I met.