

The Road Home or A Cold Comfort Affair

July 1990

The day was warm enough to be sitting outside on the small upstairs terrace. It was a small fishing village on the east coast and the restaurant specialised in seafood.

The menu looked great and it was one of those rare occasions where it was going to be difficult to choose because everything appealed.

"Are you having a starter?"

"No. I'm going to have the whole smoked sea bass."

"I think I'll just have a starter as my main. It's only lunchtime after all."

"Who's going to drive?"

"I don't mind."

"It's my turn. I'm quite happy to."

"In that case I'll have a large glass of the Picpoul and I'll treat myself to the smoked lobster."

The couple sitting behind them were whispering in that stagey way that forces you to tune in and listen. So listen they did.

New Year 1991

It was one of those days where the sky was that Languedoc blue and any hint of a cloud was a figment of imagination.

There was snow on the distant hills to the north. Below them was a wide expanse of river with its pale yellow reed beds bathed in the fading light and thin cold of a January afternoon.

"You wouldn't have thought they would give so much detail away."

"Well, they didn't know that we could hear them, did they?"

"Do you think we'll be alone? Why did we have to leave so late? I mean it's going to be dark soon."

"Because there's far less chance of anyone else being about."

"We've never done anything like this before. We might get caught. Do you think they were telling the truth? I only hope we won't need to use these for this," Fingering the thin rope and roll of duck tape.

They were sitting in the car in one of the few lay-bys on the narrow, quiet country road.

"Look, we need to make sure there's no-one else about. You know the score."

"But if anyone does take any interest..."

"...we'll just let them see the camera and tripod and they'll think we're artists out getting source material. Easy. Right, let's go."

They had been sitting in the car for half an hour and almost nothing had gone past. They left the car and made their way along the side of the road towards the small church. The 18th century building was not their destination but had indicated the proximity of a path that would lead them down to the river.

The church was concealed from the road by a slight dip in the ground. This dropped to a shallow platform like area where the old graveyard was hidden from view.

Just beyond the entrance to the churchyard was a farm gate.

This opened on to the track they were looking for, or would have opened had it not been secured by a hefty padlock and equally heavy chain.

Climbing over, they left the tripod in the bushes keeping the camera in the small day-sack with a number of plastic bags and their equipment.

"This looks as though it's the right place. It fits the description."

"They mentioned holly and ivy and a farm track."

"It certainly hasn't seem much traffic in a while."

Overgrown though it was, the path had certainly been wide enough for a tractor at one time, probably still would be. Underfoot was rubble and shale and it was still possible to see the ruts churned by farm vehicles.

The track led down towards the river swinging gently left. As it petered out a footpath was discernible.

"Dog walkers?"

"Maybe. We need to be careful. Remember what they said."

"I think we should have gone into the church to pray. Let's hope we find them and get away again before someone finds us."

A conversation overheard in a bar several months before had led them here. Those giving away their secrets not realising that the recipients of their clandestine knowledge were also hunters and prepared to go to any lengths if the promise of reward was great enough. The description of the church. The track down to the river. A ruined house on the shore. The talk of big dogs and shotguns not quite enough to put them off.

"Let's hope they're there."

"You've got everything?"

"Yes."

"And the gloves?"

"Yes."

"For both of us?"

"Yes, and I hope we won't need the tape or the rope and certainly not the secateurs."

"If they prove to be particularly vicious we might need to do some restraining and persuasion."

When they came out of the woods they stood for a few moments on a banking about two yards above a shingle beach with the river a few feet away.

"It looks as though the water comes right up."

"I think the tide's coming in. I don't like this. How long have we got?"

"It'll take as long as it takes. Let's get moving. It's not going to be easy walking either. Come on!"

Half an hour took them across a small stream and led them to the ruined bothy that their unbeknown guides had described.

"No doubt about it at all. This is where they talked about!"

Though there was no sign of recent occupation of a human nature the damp odour of mould and lime mortar was accompanied by the rank smell of decay and evidence of rats. The aptly named 'Sure as Death' Sandbank lay just visible two miles away up stream ahead of them.

"Let's get out of here before someone comes and finds us! I'm sure the tide's coming in!"

"Think positively! It can't be much further and they'll be waiting for us. Look along there!"

Up ahead there was a small group standing but too far away up the beach to make out any detail and see what they were carrying. Even at this distance their limbs seemed to be intertwined and held at odd angles.

Two hours later after some fairly fierce struggling which resulted in numerous wounds with their gloves stained with the blood from their efforts. The secateurs were exhausted from some pretty hot work. With everything packed into the plastic bags in the day-sack they made their way back to the car and the road home.

Christmas 2021

It was cold outside with a dusting of snow on the ground. Inside, the room was warm and comfortable with a window that let in the winter sunlight. A wood fire burned in the open hearth of a stone fireplace with that unmistakable smell of birchwood. They were relaxing while a goose pie cooked.

The bottle contained a deep ruby liquid reminiscent of the colour of blood. Carefully, with the aid of a butler's thief, the cork was pulled from the flask, the liquid was sniffed appreciatively and a small amount poured

into each of two small crystal glasses. Smiling they tasted the bitter sweet liquor.

"I can't believe we haven't opened it before now!"

"How old is it?"

"Mmmm, twenty years?"

"It's been worth the wait though, and the effort we made at the time."

"Yes."

"This has to be the best sloe gin we've ever made!"

"Here's to Flisk and the Tay."

Where the Tay runs past Flisk,
Who would take a risk,
Of gathering in the sloe?
With spines that poke
And cut and gouge,
Only those who are in the know.

Jeff Erton Green

March 2021