

January

*Oh the January man, he walks abroad
in woollen coat and boots of leather . . .*



NEW YEAR AT THE Leigh, and Blacksmith Lane is six feet deep in floodwater. Roo and I can only stand and stare. King Severn has launched his annual invasion of the Gloucestershire village where we grew up. His summer bed lies under Wainlode Hill, more than a mile away across the fields, but now the houses along Blacksmith Lane have their toes in Severn's water. The flooded lanes are crazed with paper-thin ice. Bubbles stand frozen stiff in the ditches, and the roadside grasses are knotted together like lumpy dreadlocks under a milk-white skin.

Roo pauses at the edge of the flood. I've known him, my friend of longest standing, my brother in all but genes, since I was three years old. What does a gentleman of settled habit and sixty-something years do now? He forges in for old times' sake, crackling the ice as he goes. Beside him I wade, step for step, till the water is within a couple of inches of my wellington tops and the pressure is beginning to compress the rubber round my shins. We stand like two old herons, up to our knees in the floods. I bend and scoop up a parallelogram of fractured ice, thinner than a pane of glass. I grin at Roo, and touch it to my tongue.

Earthy, cold, metallic, drying the saliva like the touch of a sloe. A spoonful of floodwater slops over the rim of my right boot. Instantly it's 1957. I am seven years old,

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sloshing home along the road in gumboots full of floodwater, listening to them squelch. I stop by our gate at the top of the hill, hopping from one foot to the other, and take the gumboots off to reveal sodden socks, the grey wool dark and dripping. I tip my left boot up and pour out a stream of water onto the grass – a satisfying little cataract, brown and foot-warmed. It smells of cows and earth, but it looks like weakly made Ovaltine. What does it taste like? I take off the other boot. It's funny how the water comes right up to the top when my foot's inside, but disappears halfway down when I take it out. I reach a finger down into the boot and bring it up dripping. Into my mouth it goes. Mmm. Not very nice. Now I know something even Daddy doesn't know. I'm pretty sure my best and only friend Roo has never tasted floodwater either – although, knowing him, I wouldn't absolutely bet on it.

Our family came to live at The Leigh when I was three, in the flood winter of 1952. The Leigh, down in the flatlands beside the River Severn, was everything that the villages high in the nearby Cotswolds were not. It was remote, a modest community of small-scale farmers on a lane to nowhere. It was self-effacing, turning its back on the main road to Gloucester and Cheltenham. It was so unfashionable as not even to exist on the social map of Gloucestershire. No one went riding or hunting or waltzing at The Leigh. No one stamped about in gymkhana boots or admired themselves in shop windows. Scattered along the lanes was a handful of mixed farms – corn, cattle, geese – and

one or two smallholdings. A church where some relation of Dick Whittington was said to have been baptized. A little primary school, destined only to last another ten years; a tiny shop in a crookback cottage. That was it for The Leigh.

We lived on a ridge at the entrance to the village in a draughty former vicarage, Hoefield House. Done out in dark brown paint and wartime blackout curtains, it was a gloomy lair when we arrived in midwinter. Mum soon had it cheered up with white walls and flowers and bright sofa covers. I had my elder sister Julia to squabble and snigger with and a big garden to play in, but only Roo for a friend. Roo lived the best part of a mile away in an ancient black-and-white farmhouse called Cyder Press, down where a straggle of red-brick houses and half-timbered cottages circled round a loop of lane. As soon as my mother judged me old enough to be out of doors on my own – probably at six or seven years old – I was pelting down to Cyder Press day after day, to escape with Roo into the promised land of the ridgy fields beyond. That was flood country, the January realm of King Severn at his maddest; a no-man’s-land where you could chew sour cider apples from the abandoned orchards and taunt the cows into giving chase, where you could run unsupervised across the Big Meadow as far as your gumboots would let you. For a restless little boy with a super-heated imagination and a proper partner-in-crime to call on, it was pure heaven. And I could get to heaven on my tri-cycle in fifteen minutes, barring accidents.

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When I got to school I found that all the other children knew what their fathers did. Fathers sold things in shops, or pulled out people's teeth, or ploughed the fields and scattered, or were away fighting for the Queen. My father was different. He drove off in the car every morning to work in Cheltenham. He came back home at night, mostly, unless it was one of the times when he was away somewhere abroad, wherever that was. What he did for a living, though, was a mystery.

'Daddy, where do you work?'

'In Cheltenham.'

'What do you do?'

'I work at the office.'

But then almost everything to do with grown-ups was a mystery.

Roo and I decide to start today's perambulation at St Catherine's church, up on high ground, and to beat the bounds of our childhood along the village lanes and field edges as far as the floods will allow us. Wandering round the churchyard before we start, I get a shock. Almost all the folk who peopled my boyhood at The Leigh are here, neatly stretched out under headstones marked with information about themselves that I can scarcely credit. They seemed as old as the hills to me back then, but these dates say that they were in their twenties and thirties, most of them, when I first knew them – the age that my own children are now. The Quemby's and the Theyers. The

Troughtons and the Poultons. The Westons, the Teakles, the Chandlers and the Freemans. I have hardly given a thought during my adult lifetime to these people who formed my view of what people should be.

As we set off from the churchyard towards the village, the January ghost of my father comes striding energetically towards us along the well-worn road in a heavy blue winter coat. Under the coat he's wearing one of his father's old suits with flapping lapels. His tie is neatly tied, his dark hair well disciplined, his black shoes impeccably shined. Some nonsense or other back at Hoefield House has made the family late for church, and Dad's sense of duty has driven him out ahead of his flock to walk the road alone, striding himself free of irritation. 'I remember how your father used to step out on his way to church,' says Roo, 'big long strides, all chin up and shoulders back. No one else walked like that.'

We pass the red-brick house where green-fingered Harry Wilks lived. Harry's wife had the beautiful name of Marguerite. Harry invariably made a clean sweep of the cups at the horticultural show; Marguerite provided the village with new-laid eggs, half a dozen a time in a brown paper bag. Just beyond the Wilks' house the tributary lane from the lower village comes in on the left. Opposite the junction is the big field where Roo and I once sat on the gate and watched a two-horse team harvesting with a reaper-binder. One of the horses was called Blackbird – Blackie for short – and wore a little straw hat with holes cut out for its ears to poke through. The reaper-binder had a clattering drum of whirling wooden bars

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that fed the harvest to the cutter and on up into the belly of the machine, which simultaneously ejected a line of neatly tied bundles of corn onto the ground. These were forked up into conical stooks once the field was cut, and left for a cart to gather before the rain set in. The Leigh must have been just about the last place in Gloucestershire to use such antiquated machinery and methods at that date. It was a different world down our lane.

From the junction by the harvest field my way home lay straight ahead, past the village school and up the slope. The crest of the ridge overlooked the main road, the A38, where Austin cars and AEC Mammoth Major lorries and Midland Red buses hurtled noisily along from Gloucester to Tewkesbury. On the ridge stood Hoefield House, its feet well out of the floods. I passed it earlier this morning, shut away behind large electronic gates in a cocoon of trees laden with mistletoe. We won't get a welcome there today. Instead, Roo and I turn our backs on the harvest field and trudge down the long road towards Cyder Press.

Riding my trike down the lane to Roo's, I'd usually meet the village's oldest inhabitant stumping his slow way along this stretch of road. Today I have learned from his gravestone that this lifelong farming man had the fine biblical name of Josiah Weston, but to us he was only and always Old Mr Weston. He had a red moon-face with white bristles, and invariably wore a floppy hat and a cowman's coat tied round the middle with binder twine. Roo reminds me now that he wore gaiters, too. Old Mr Weston had the most startling blue eyes and a gentle Gloucestershire voice as rich as cream. He lived his days

not by the clock but by the light in the sky. Once he remarked to me, 'I go to bed with the sun, and I rise up with him.' I pondered that for a long time afterwards. My sister Julia had a season of wondering whether Old Mr Weston might not be God.

Roo and I stroll along, our wellingtons flapping companionably in rhythm. We pass tall red Prospect House where Miss Mauser lodged, a dignified elderly refugee spinster with a ramrod-straight back, all mousey brown in box-pleated skirts and old-fashioned jackets with square shoulders and tight sleeves. She rode an upright pushbike as tall and angular as herself, with a little puttering petrol engine fitted to the back wheel.

Beyond Prospect House the lane passes an orchard, beautifully replanted and maintained these days, overgrown with enormous unkempt cider-apple trees back in the 1950s. The Leigh had been a famous place for cider, and in locations around the village the farmers of yesteryear had planted more apple trees than corn or grass to supply the local makers. But those days were long gone when we came to live at The Leigh, their legacy the tangled orchards and an ancient cider press that sat on the front lawn at Roo's house, its immobile stone crusher as thick and clumsy as an ogre's cartwheel.

At the turn of the lane is the Fête Field, where once a year Mrs Paul and Mrs Poulton and Mrs Chandler bowled for a pig and guessed the weight of a super-solid fruit cake, while Mr Troughton and Mr Weston and Mr Theyer competed to back their tractors and trailers round a fiendish course of posts and ropes.

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Opposite stands the old cottage, humpbacked, half-timbered, with its poky dark room that held the village shop and post office. The memories are flooding thick and fast now. Mrs Poulton gardening, up to her waist in a sea of green and purple cabbages. You couldn't charm Mrs Poulton with a smile. Her soft-voiced sister-in-law Miss Poulton shuffling behind the counter to unscrew a glass jar and weigh out a quarter of tongue-tingling clove sweets – 'Very com-*for*-ting, the winter mixture.' Bert Poulton, the postman, cycling on his red Post Office bike in capacious wellingtons with orange tops, his knees out at 90 degrees, fetching and delivering letters twice a day.

'Bert? No, he never catches cold. I make sure he drinks his sprout water, that's why.'

'What's sprout water, Mrs Poulton?'

'The water we boil our sprouts in, of course. What else did you think it could be?'

We turn the corner. 'Bert Poulton had a black bike for cycling to church on Sundays,' says Roo. 'Remember that?' I don't. 'Well, he did. Wasn't allowed to use Post Office property out of working hours. My older brother used to tell me he just had one bike and painted it black every Sunday and red again on Mondays. I believed him, too.'

Blacksmith Lane proves impassable. We turn and trudge back around the loop of the lower village, past Dan Theyer's farm where a horse stands with bent head in a farmyard that seems hardly to have changed in sixty years. Past Island Cottage, site of the old-fashioned dame

school where my sister had the Three R's drummed into her by fair means or foul. Past Thin Mr Theyer's farm up on its rise of ground. Roo and I always had a healthy respect for Thin Mr Theyer, and it became a sight healthier after we decided to explore the Haunted House. A thrilling feature of The Leigh for its two juvenile adventurers was the existence of a few houses that lay in the fields outside the compass of the village road, well beyond the reach of tarmac or motor cars. At least two of these old dwellings were still inhabited by self-sufficient characters whom the twentieth century had scarcely reached. Another had decayed to a heap of damp bricks in a slough of mud and stinging nettles where we feared to go. The Haunted House, standing two fields away from the road on Thin Mr Theyer's land, occupied a status in between; it had been empty for years, but still retained its two storeys and a house-like shape under a half-unslated roof.

How we convinced ourselves the house was haunted I can't remember. Probably Roo's big brother Roger had spun us the mother of all yarns about it. Whatever the catalyst for the expedition, we found ourselves one afternoon under its red-brick wall, looking over our shoulders in a stew of guilt and bravado. Roo got through a downstairs window, and I followed him inside. The first room contained mildewed walls and great gaps in the floorboards. The second room contained a broken table. And the third room contained Thin Mr Theyer, with a cattle switch in his hand. What the farmer was doing in the old ruin I can't imagine – probably checking that no silly little boys were breaking their necks in his property. It must

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have given him an unpleasant jolt when we came peeping round the door. We had been terrifying ourselves with tales of the ghoulies and ghosties we might encounter in the Haunted House, so he certainly gave us a nasty shock. We legged it back past the table and the floorboard gaps, out of the window and across the field, Roo in the lead, till we reached the stile. Roo leaped over, and I hopped up onto the footboard at his heels. But Thin Mr Theyer evidently possessed the skill of silent running, because I suddenly heard his angry roar in my ear, followed by a crisp smack and a sharp sting on the bum.

I scrambled over and we ran like hell for Cyder Press and safety. The wicked fled. No man pursued. And I spent the next twenty-four hours anxiously wondering if I dared approach Bert Poulton to intercept the outraged letter I was convinced that Thin Mr Theyer was writing to Roo's father and mine about how he'd 'Caught Your Son Trespassing'. Needless to say, no such letter materialized, either by the morning or the afternoon post. When we met Thin Mr Theyer in the lane a day or two later he afforded us his usual nod and said nothing. Roo and I slunk by like two naughty pups, and gave the Haunted House and its guardian a wide berth after that.

Walking the lane today, we relive the encounter. We are still laughing about it when we come abreast of Cyder Press. The old house appears to lean with the curve of the lane as it always did, its black timbers seamed with age, its windows peeping out like sleepy eyes from their dormer hutches. Cyder Press was Roo's place, the hub of

our wanderings, my home from home. You could creep right into the sitting-room fireplace, curl yourself into the inglenook seat with Sophie, the ancient cat, on your lap, and be safe. On summer nights you craned your neck and looked up the black crusty flue to where stars floated in the square frame of the chimney mouth. In winter you kicked off your boots in the kitchen and came to sit in the ingle and have your knee scabs softened and your chilly cheeks scorched by the fire. The logs spat sparks, and thick yellow ropes of smoke twisted up a chimney that had grown fierce and powerful. Cyder Press was the port of embarkation for adventure with my shipmate by flood and field, and a harbour to tie up in after storms at home or a shipwreck in the old coal canal at the end of the Big Meadow.

Today Roo stands grumbling in the lane, harrumphing at the changes his old home has undergone. The tree that contained our treehouse has been felled. We carved our secret symbols with penknives into its scaly bark, a simple and effective 'ZXZ' for Roo, a very impractical eagle crossed with a brace of lances for me. A memory surfaces – the pair of us hiding among the branches of the treehouse and shouting insults down at The Leigh's one and only village teenager as he cycled past in enormous gumboots on a bike with handlebars shaped like a buffalo's horns. In his fury at our cheek, he braked so hard that he skidded and went sideways into the ditch. I can see the poor youth, unable to get at us, shaking his fist and swearing vengeance as he remounted and wobbled away past Cyder Press. What happened then? He must

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have got us back – big boys invariably did. But how did he do it? Thump us? Give us a kick with his outsize wellies? I ask Roo, but he can't even remember the incident. It's so vivid in my mind's eye. But perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps I've made it all up. Who, apart from the two of us, can now vouch for these scrapes and misdeeds of ours that took place out of our parents' ken? I link my arm in Roo's and feel even closer to my former brother-in-mischief, my only authenticator, as we come in sight of the village pond and the mouth of the space/time portal we knew as the Green Lane.

Here's a shock. Where has the Green Lane gone? They can't have filled it in, can they? 'Ah,' says Roo, 'you've never seen the flood bank, have you?'

The Green Lane was one of the communication trenches by which King Severn would make his stealthy advance towards the front line of the village lane. A rush forward when the pressure of flooding from Wainlode Hill had reached critical mass, and the lane and its houses would be captured. The house at Cyder Press had not itself been flooded in Roo's lifetime, but we didn't consider it a proper January if the water hadn't at least crept under his gate and halfway up the slope of the garden. As for the neighbours, they were lucky to get away without an inundation. Why The Leigh's villagers shifted themselves and their dwellings from the higher ground near St Catherine's to the notoriously flood-prone levels of the Severn is hard to fathom, but that's what happened some time in the fourteenth century. Perhaps the Black Death drove them away from what they saw as infected ground.

In any case, the local historians of The Leigh – in other words, all its long-term inhabitants – were adamant in the 1950s that it hadn't always flooded like this. After all, that Cyder Press has some Saxon walling, that herringbone bit next the lane, don't it? Those old Saxons wouldn't have built anything where the floods could get at it. When did all the flooding start? Well, that was back before Grandfather's time, when they built the lock gates at Gloucester, look. That conclusive *look* was our regional verbal tic, providing emphasis at the end of a sentence. Come out of that orchard, look. Farmer'll have your hide for that, look.

Some time in the last few years the householders along the lane must have raised an almighty fuss, because a ten-foot-high flood bank has been constructed all along the field margins. Roo and I climb to the top and admire the way it cradles the lowest edge of the village within its green protective arm. Beyond lies the gunmetal-grey ice sheet of the floods, broken by willows and hedge lines. The spreading Severn has reached the foot of the flood bank, and there it has been stopped in its tracks. But it still occupies the Green Lane, which lies directly below us. The old cart road curves away towards open country, ice in its skirts, a waxy sheen on its surface. We go down the bank and test the going, but it's hopeless. Water wells higher over the fractured ice at every stride, our wellingtons constrict, they'll drown if we take another step. The Green Lane is knee-deep at the first gate, deeper still round the bend. Our further walking plans have been washed away. No Big Meadow today for Roo and me. So

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we shove our hands in our pockets and kick the ice to pieces and stare our fill.

The Green Lane was no more than a quarter of a mile from end to end. It was a narrow little cart track, and very muddy. At some stage someone had tried to combat its muddiness by dumping several wagonloads of stone and broken bricks along the roadway. They made a wobbly surface to walk on, especially in thin-soled gumboots. The Green Lane was separated from the forgotten orchards and ridge-and-furrow fields by deep ditches on either side. Frogspawn floated on the murky water in spring, duckweed in summer. In those seasons the ditches exhaled a warm sour smell. But it was in the winter, when they froze over, that they came into their own. If the ice was pimpled and opaque, it was probably thick enough to slide on. If it was edged with pretty white whorls and gave out a soft groan at your first footfall, then it was thin enough to fall through. The dangerous thrill of taking a second step away from the bank, and the lurch of the heart – not all that unpleasant – as the ice sheet bent inwards and splintered and your boot went crashing through into icy water, have stayed sharp with me.

Is the old cattle trap still there at the far end of the Green Lane? Roo says he's pretty sure it is. We lean on the gate side by side and watch the twin ghosts of our boyhood selves go sloshing away down Memory Lane between hedges and the reflections of hedges, wading out of sight round the corner, wading back to 1957. The cattle

trap was a hollow box of tarry timbers where a dozen bullocks could be corralled for drenching or dipping. The top rail of the trap was our moot hall. Roo and I would climb up and sit there leg to leg, gazing out across the Big Meadow and deciding what to do with the whole enormous day. Go sliding on the floods? Make a boat and sail to Tewkesbury? Go ghost-hunting in the Haunted House? Scramble through the bramble hedge into the derelict orchard to steal a hankie full of withered cider apples too sour for anything but pelting each other? Climb the willow pollards and try to cut our secret symbols in the iron-hard bark? A hundred choices for two giddy boys set free on their own in a fifty-acre field.

Flood time was boat-building time, after the ice had melted. One day we found a sheet of corrugated iron in the ditch alongside the cattle trap. ‘Coo, look at that!’ As we tugged it out and balanced it on the corner of the trap it clanged against the timbers, iron on wood, a manly sound. Roo ran home across the ridge-and-furrow to Cyder Press, and came back with four raspberry canes and a pocket full of green garden twine.

‘Put them here, like this.’

‘No, like this.’

‘If we bend it up like this, and put those there . . .’

‘You’ve done a granny knot.’

‘No, I haven’t.’

‘Yes, you have. You need a reef knot, my dad said. Like this, look – right over left, left over right. That’s what sailors do.’

‘No, they don’t.’

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‘Yes, they do. My dad says, and he was in the war. Look, it’s really tight.’

‘Go on, it’ll float. Go on, get in. It will float, really.’

But it didn’t. I climbed down onto the treacherous thing, and it turned straight over and snagged me underneath. My eyes were full of murk, there was mud and water in my mouth. Roo’s boots swam into vision. The clumsy sheet pressed me down and then swirled away. My face heaved out into the air and I saw the skeleton twigs of a cider tree scratching across the sky. The iron boat had sunk. I threshed around and sat up in six inches of water and howled the floods out of my lungs. A drowned rat couldn’t have been drownder, Old Mr Weston said when he met me scowling and slopping home.

It was the reef knots. Right over left, left over right was what I’d meant to do. Right over left, right over left – that’s what I’d done. Dad wouldn’t have made a mistake like that. Dad would have got it right. That’s what dads did. Dads always squeezed toothpaste and Seccotine fish glue from the bottom of the tube. They went on long walks in the Brecon Beacons. They knew the right way and the wrong way. Straight-ahead dads with their parted hair and shiny toecaps, their navy-blue gabardines, their neat toolboxes and sorted desk drawers and secret war compartments in their heads that you mustn’t rummage in. The pattern of men for little 1950s boys with their own gabardines and secrets and short-back-and-sides.

‘What do you do at the office, Daddy?’

‘I’m a civil servant.’

'But what's that?'

'It's what I do at the office.'

You couldn't see the office from the Green Lane or the Big Meadow, or from our house for that matter. But I knew what it looked like – a grey low-rise sea of Nissen huts behind chicken wire, sprawled awkwardly on the outskirts of Cheltenham's elegant Regency spa town. A few aeriels stuck up out of the roofs. There was a man on the gate. When Dad's Morris 8 wouldn't start, we'd sometimes have to drop him off on our school run. He'd get out of Mum's car and stride away, shoulders back, chin up, towards the gatehouse and the pole barrier, looking determined but also strangely vulnerable, as though we'd caught him out at something. The Nissen-hut city swallowed him up. No signposts said 'GCHQ' back then.

The Big Meadow was a throwback, like The Leigh itself. It was a lammas meadow, traditionally farmed since who knew when? In winter King Severn made his royal advance and retreat, scattering largesse in his watery train – mineral-rich silt that settled in the drowned grasses. In spring the grasses grew like billy-o. So did ragged robin and marsh orchids, yellow rattle and meadowsweet and buttercups by the million. Snipe zigzagged away when you walked the marshy meadow. Lapwings flew overhead in black-and-white crowds, creaking in their peevish wild voices, flickering like old film as they suddenly tumbled earthwards. In summer the farmer cut the grass and let the brown and black cattle loose to graze the short stalks with

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gentle tearing noises. You couldn't get a cow to come to you like a dog, unless it was chasing you. But if you shut the cattle-trap gate and leaned on the moot rail, the herd would approach on the other side with infinite caution, keeping their bodies back and pushing their necks out towards you with soft exhalations of unexpectedly sweet breath. The boldest cow might even extend a pale rubbery tongue and rasp your outstretched palm, leaving a smear of saliva stickier than glue that you had to wash off in the ditch.

'Eeeurgh!'

Sometimes a cow would behave very rudely, poking its tongue right up each of its nostrils in turn, causing us to collapse with the giggles. Roo and I knew we weren't allowed to pick our noses, but we tried in vain to emulate the cows. Neither of us could reach our noses with our tongue tips, so we were even-steven there. There was one skill that my friend possessed, however, in which he held the whip hand over me, try as I might to copy him. Roo could clip his toenails with his teeth.

On the far side of the Big Meadow ran the disused coal canal from Coombe Hill, the boundary of our wanderings when we were seven or eight years old. Water voles dived in with modest plops as you approached. We chucked stones at them, and when we got older we shot at them with air rifles. They were rats, weren't they? Rats were Old Mr Weston's enemies, and Mr Troughton's, and Dan Theyer's. We were actually *helping* the farmers by knocking them off. So we rationalized our attempts at exterminating the Big Meadow's 'rats'.

The Big Meadow was a launching slip to freedom. We

must have run thousands of miles there. By the time we were nine or ten we had crossed its far boundaries and were exploring a wider world – down to the Red Lion under Wainlode Hill to fish in vain in the racing bend of the Severn, or over to Apperley under its tump of hill to buy Corona pop and Fruit Salad chews (eight for a penny) at Mrs Perry's dark little back-room shop. Something lasting was ignited in me: a pleasure in exploring, and a feeling of being at home in the outdoors.

Roo wasn't with me on the occasion I arrived at Mrs Perry's in a rainstorm and found she'd shut up her shop unexpectedly for the afternoon. Mrs Perry's copy of the *Gloucestershire Echo*, spotted with raindrops, lay on a stone by her front door. I decided I'd save it from the rain, just for her. What a good and helpful boy! If Roo had been there, perhaps he would have dissuaded me. Somehow I doubt it. What gave me the effrontery to climb onto Mrs Perry's water butt, scale her sloping outhouse roof and climb in through her upstairs window I can't now imagine. But I can remember the self-righteousness with which I told myself that I'd walked all the way to Apperley, I wanted my sweets and my bottle of limeade, and Mrs Perry wouldn't mind.

I crept down the stairs, laid the paper on a chair, lifted the sneck of the door into the shop part of the cottage and found myself in sweetie paradise. I unscrewed jars, opened boxes, weighed and measured into brown paper bags. Then I jotted down a list of everything I'd taken.

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4 oz bullseyes
1 Mars bar
1 sherbet fountain
2 gobstoppers
4 oz sherbet lemons
1 pkt sweet cigarettes

It came to 2/4d. I piled up the coins neatly and wrote a note to go with them, something along the lines of: 'Dear Mrs Perry, Your paper was getting wet, so I brought it inside for you. I have taken the above sweets and left you the money.' And just before I left, I signed it, 'FROM AN UNKNOWN FRIEND'. I must have been reading Enid Blyton that week.

I let myself out, walked home soaking wet with cheeks a-bulge, and thought no more about it. But I didn't remain an unknown friend for long. A week later came the summons to Coombe Hill police station. Breaking and entering, boomed Sergeant Wheatley over my downcast head: a Very Serious Matter, young man. The sergeant, an imposing figure of authority, administered a ticking-off that had first my mother, and then myself, crying our eyes out. It wasn't till we got home that I discovered she'd feared I might be sent away to Borstal. I had to apologize to Mrs Perry in person, a sticky interview, and accept a parental ban on ever darkening her door again.



The twin ghosts on the moot rail are late for tea. They pull on sodden socks and squelching gumboots and descend

from their perch above the flooded meadow. Hands in their shorts pockets, they turn their backs on the cattle trap and wade back down the Green Lane, back to their twenty-first-century personas of two old friends who lean together on a gate by the new flood bank.

I ask Roo if he can still chew his toes. It doesn't appear that he can. We make our way thoughtfully back across the fields to the church and our cars. A week from now, we know, the river will have withdrawn to its rightful bed in the bend by Wainlode Hill, leaving plastic bags in the willow branches and lank brown straws and twigs along the flood bank. A scummy tidemark along the verges of Blacksmith Lane will be left to mark the limit of its advance this year, until the new leaves and fresh grass of spring have hidden and expunged all signs that King Severn has ever been there.

