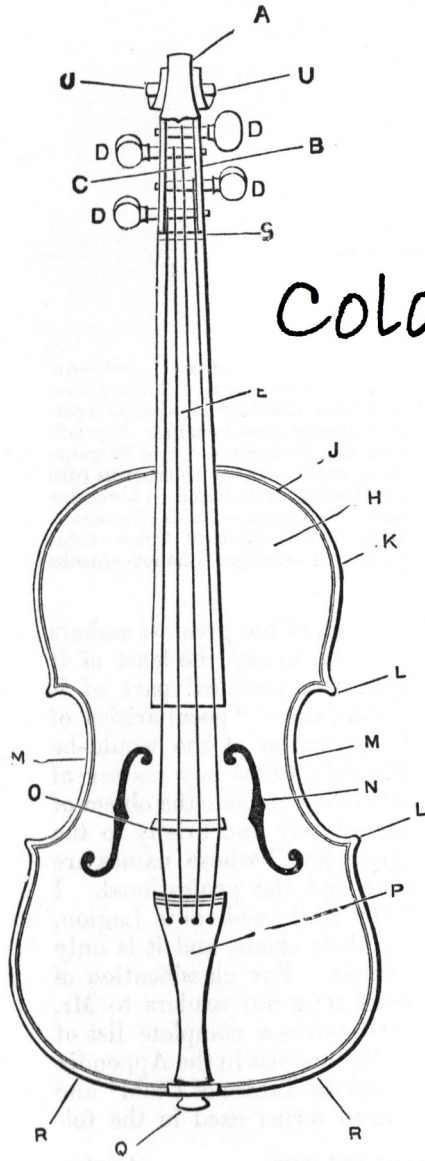


Martín Cooper



Cold
Hillsíde





Cold Hillside

Martin Cooper

stiltjack

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This is for my sister Julie.

Not too fast
Start soft then slow build

Concertina Em drone 4 bars
Fiddle melody x2 then voice

CHORUS:

Too many battles, too many loads,
Grey with the dust of too many roads
To a bed on a cold hillside.

Too many battles, too many loads,
Old wounds carried down too many roads
To a bed on a cold hillside.

Fiddle break?

Too many battles, too many loads,
Old friends buried by too many roads
In a bed on a cold hillside.

Simon Coltraine, *Cold Hillside*

Fiddle melody ad lib

Voice:

~~"Too many"~~

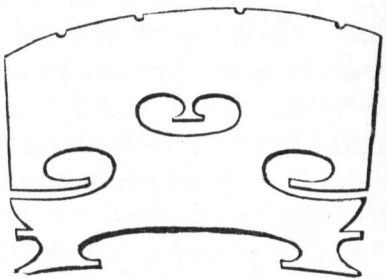
"Old friends..."

"Old wounds..." etc.

Off the beat

Fade

Sound Check



1

Giles, my sibling, my Mephistophilis. You lie whenever it suits you, but when you lie to me, surely you can take the trouble to make it convincing?

2

There is something warm running down my face. I lick my lips and taste salt, wipe my hand across my mouth and look. Blood, black on my fingers. The windscreen has a jagged hole in it and I can smell the fog, cold and earthy, drifting in. Although the headlights have gone out the instrument panel is still glowing and the cab of the minibus seems brightly lit compared with the dark outside. The engine has stopped but the heater fan is whirring. Behind me people are moaning. Someone starts sobbing.

1

MARTIN COOPER

I am dangling in my seatbelt, suspended at what is now the top of the vehicle, which has gone over onto the driver's side. I can feel myself slipping out of the straps and I squirm round to plant a foot on the steering column and lift myself away from Tod, who is slumped below me. It looks as if he has been thrown into the door. His head is hanging at an odd angle. I twist and bend some more and reach down to grope for a pulse. Nothing. I tell myself that I am feeling in the wrong place, but I am not. I wonder if his wife has had the baby yet. Must have.

“Shit.”

The women behind me were not strapped in when the bus rolled. A couple of them at least are out cold, the rest are crouched in the gaps between the horizontal seats, hugging themselves. All of them are bleeding.

“Shit. Shit. Shit.”

One foot still on the steering column I edge the other onto the side of Tod's seat and freeze as a stabbing pain in my side takes my breath away. Cracked rib. But I am thinking about sparks and fuel leaks. Does diesel burn like petrol? I fumble above my head and manage to get the door unlocked. It lifts a couple of inches, but the angle is difficult and the weight of it defeats me. I slip and end crouched with one foot on Tod's shoulder. I straighten my legs anyway and heave upwards. Tod collapses beneath me but the door bangs up and I find myself supporting its weight, standing with my own shoulders outside the vehicle. I cannot move any further. I can hardly breathe.

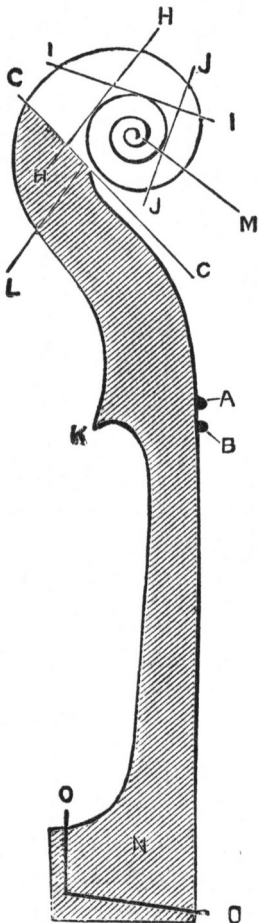
A few moment's rest, then I brace myself more firmly and slide one hand into a pocket, looking for my mobile phone.

“This is Simon... No I can't bloody speak up. We've rolled the van. All hurt, and I'm pretty sure at least one dead. Get someone up here fast. If I haven't checked in by two they'll come looking. Is the tracer still working? OK then.”

COLD HILLSIDE

It is as much as I can manage. I slide down into the shambles below and the door thuds shut, just missing my fingers. Christ, what a mess.

First Set



CHAPTER ONE

1

Two birds are strutting across the grass. One for sorrow, two for... not joy, certainly. These are crows, birds of ill omen, roadside carrion eaters with scabby beaks and a knowing look. One for trouble, two for more trouble. The collie launches itself from the path, its claws scrabbling for a purchase on the gravel, but the birds hop into the air and in a couple of beats lift their dangling feet clear. The dog slows to a canter and circles as the crows drift downwind, then lunges at them again. Still no joy.

The sun is throwing long horizontal shadows across the grass and the chilling air smells of wood smoke and rot. Fallen leaves are already collecting under foot. In the valley below mist is gathering along the river, while the downs rear up again green and blue on the far side. The path curves away past a clump of birches, towards a parking area half hidden among the trees. A man is leaning against the bonnet of a car. He hears us coming

MARTIN COOPER

and turns his head. The dog trots up to him, tail fanning furiously, and sniffs his trouser cuffs.

“Mr Coltraine.” Not a question. He knows who he is speaking to. “I’m DI Randall.”

“Identification?”

He produces a leather wallet, flips it open and returns it to his pocket. I pat my own pockets, fumble in my jacket and locate my reading glasses. I put them on and hold out my hand. He hesitates then takes out his warrant card again and passes it over. The DI’s ID. Photo booth likeness. Face the camera, chin up: mid-thirties probably; close-cropped hair, greying early; wide-spaced, deep-set pale eyes, the surrounding sockets rather dark. Adam’s apple sticking out. No spare flesh, skin stretched tight over prominent cheekbones.

“So you are.”

He retrieves the wallet, pockets it.

“You wanted to talk about your brother, Mr Coltraine.”

“I’ve wanted to talk about my brother for some time. Several of your colleagues have been too busy to do more than go through the motions.”

“Well, I’m sorry if it has seemed that way, sir. It’s a question of resources and priorities.”

A car lies upturned in the dark on the grassy verge of a country road. The roof on the driver’s side has been crushed leaving the machine’s mud-streaked underside canted at an angle. A wheel spins to a halt and liquid puddles under the engine. Fragments of glass glitter in the beam of one undamaged headlight. Resources and priorities.

But this is nonsense. Imagination. I did not get to see the place until a couple of days after the accident and by that time the remains of the car had been winched onto the back of a truck and hauled away for scrap. My brother’s remains likewise.

COLD HILLSIDE

2

Even then I was not sure I had the right spot. All I had to go by were a couple of black skid marks on the road. But how many accident sites could there be? I parked my own car opposite and got out for a closer look. There were muddy gouges in the sides of the ditch, a few shards of broken glass and a black patch where oil had soaked into the grass. Not much to mark the passing of a life.

There was some light traffic. A Land Rover slowed and I caught the pale flash of the driver's face looking in my direction. Further on it slowed again, did a sudden U turn and rolled back on the opposite side of the road, coming to rest nose to nose with my own car.

That stretch ran dead straight for a couple of miles, flanked by an avenue of beeches, huge mature trees meeting overhead and slicing the sunlight as you drove between them. 'B' road, nothing special; the link between two market towns, a bit of a rat run on school days. The chief hazards were unexpected dips every few hundred yards, each one big enough to hide an oncoming lorry.

"Need any help, mate?" The driver of the Land Rover had got out and was standing by his open door looking across.

"What?"

"The car. Need any help?"

"Oh. No, no. The car's fine. Just stretching my legs. Thanks though."

"OK. No problem." He got back into the vehicle but did not pull away immediately. I knelt to examine the ditch again. It was deep, with vertical sides. Enough to flip a car over if it put a wheel in at speed. At the bottom, a few small puddles with a sheen of oil on the surface. The pickup truck had torn up the

MARTIN COOPER

grass alongside – almost gone in itself, by the look of things, trying to get close to the wreck. Some yards away were more tyre tracks. Police? Ambulance? I looked up and saw my would-be rescuer talking on a mobile phone.

I straightened, then stood at the edge of the verge, looking at the road. Giles must have been travelling fast, judging by the tyre marks. He had braked hard, but with the car under control, leaving two long, straight tracks of rubber on the tarmac. Then he must have hauled the wheel over because the tracks veered to the left.

I crossed to the Land Rover. The man sitting in the driver's seat watched me approach, still talking into his phone. When I tapped on the window he spoke a few last words and pressed the *End Call* button. I could hear his voice, though not what he was saying. He wound down the window.

“Sorry to interrupt. Do you know anything about the accident? Last Friday night, it would have been, about eleven. Car turned over round here.”

“No... No, not me, mate. Sorry.”

“Ah. It's just that I thought you might have driven by the next day or something.”

“No. I'm not often down this way.” He looked past me along the road, the way he had come.

“Right. Well, sorry to bother you. And thanks for stopping earlier.”

“What? Oh... Any time.”

I nodded and walked the few yards along to my own car, where I reversed up until I could clear his wing and pull away. I lost sight of the Land Rover almost immediately but when I came up out of the first of the dips I could still see it in the mirror. Another car had drawn up alongside it and my friend was leaning out of his window talking to somebody inside. Then I plunged into the next hollow.

COLD HILLSIDE

I came back that night. The road was deserted and I accelerated up to and through the speed limit exactly as Giles would have done. It was cold, dry and clear. No moon, no cloud cover to scatter back distant street lighting. The beech trunks glowed in the headlamps. From time to time a side wind blew leaves across the cones of light. It was like driving through the bleached rib cage of an immense whale. I caught a glimpse of skid marks, then darkness until the outskirts of the next town.

3

The dog has disappeared among the trees, off on a mission in a world of smells.

Randall is looking at me oddly.

“Well...” I grope back for his last comment. “Resources and priorities. But now the police call me. Does that mean priorities have changed?”

“It means that if you have any new information relating to the accident, we would like to hear it.”

“And why should I suddenly have new information?”

“Your brother telephoned you shortly before he died.”

“Nothing new there. I told your colleagues.”

“Where were you at the time?”

“Salisbury Arts Centre.”

“Can anyone confirm that?”

“Don’t mobile phone records include location?”

“Yes, they do. And yours confirm that your mobile was in Salisbury that Friday evening. I was wondering whether you were there too. Did anyone see you?”

“About 300 people. I was playing – we were about to go on, in fact, when he caught me.”

“A musician.” He sounds as if he is scraping something off

MARTIN COOPER

the sole of his shoe.

“Yes, a musician. As I am sure your colleagues told you. What are you after, exactly? A fortnight ago nobody wanted to know. A token WPC to empathise with the grieving relatives, but don’t clutter up our nick for too long. Now you’re checking phone records.”

“You seem to be coping well with your brother’s death.”

Yes. Well enough. Except that when I wake every morning he is the first person I think of. I am shocked that after so short a time I can barely remember his face, but his voice on the phone is as clear as ever.

How’s things little brother?

This is his dog and his county. His house, his woodland, his shoreline. A small part of it literally so, the rest resonant with his life. I laid a fire last night, first one of the year. Sitting by it I thought: “Must tell Giles next time I speak to him”. Then I heard the wind rattling the window.

4

The downs ended where we lived, only half a mile from the sea. I remember how astonishing the discovery seemed. The chalk that swept along the whole of the south coast finally gave way to crumbling cliffs and shingle, right outside our house. I could look out of my bedroom window and see the tip of the coiling roots of England.

The downs were on my personal map long before I became aware of their place in the national landscape. At the head of our valley a grassy slope swept round in a tight arc, creating an open-sided bowl, sides far too steep for cultivation or even for walking, but slashed across with sheep paths. At the top, hunched against the sky on a landlocked headland, were

COLD HILLSIDE

shadowed contours said to belong to a Roman camp. When the fog blew in from the sea you could hear the legions marching along from Dorchester.

Giles was five years older than me, but we were farm kids, with few near neighbours. I suppose any company was better than none. Our father was a remote figure and, to me at any rate, a grim one: craggy, weathered, temper worn thin by a lifetime's losing struggle for livelihood, inherited rather than chosen. Mother I remember as silent, patient, faded. An expert at making do.

In anything less than a torrential downpour Giles and I would be out on the hills or the shingle, outlaws always. Often even then, for there were plenty of places to shelter from the weather – a barn, several ruinous huts rarely used outside the lambing season and patched up with sacks and baling twine, a couple of shallow caves down by the beach. Terribly unsafe, those caves seem now. Scarcely a winter passed without part of one of our fields sliding into the sea.

We spent a lot of time up at the camp, attacking or defending to the last man. One summer we built siege engines. The most successful was a catapult which could hurl half a house brick about ten yards. We mounted it on a set of pram wheels, then spent hours scouring the beaches for ammunition – pebbles the size of tennis balls, as nearly round as possible. The whole lot we ferried in stages up to the ramparts, where the stones were stacked in cairns ready to repel marauding sheep.

Giles had been reading about how some Roman general dealt with local resistance. When a township had been invested for several weeks both sides would naturally have suffered casualties. He put the bodies of the dead in his catapults and shot them over the wall, where they lay unburied, adding disease to starvation. The book did not say what his troops thought about it.

MARTIN COOPER

We decided to look for dead rabbits. The warrens had been full the year before and myxomatosis was back, so we did not have to look far. Neither of us was very keen to handle the animal, but we managed to kick the grisly corpse onto my handkerchief and transfer it, lolling and dangling, to the catapult. Giles wound back the mechanism and sighted down the hill. He pulled the release lever and the throwing arm snapped forward. Inertia whipped the rabbit's head back and it came off, hitting the catapult frame and splattering us both with juices. The body soared outwards and burst against the hillside below, scattering maggots like shrapnel.

I think that must have been one of our last visits to the camp. The following summer Giles was old enough to buy a beat-up moped which he transformed, in a series of profitable deals, into the largest motorbike he could legally ride with L plates. I did not see much of him and in any case I had moved up to secondary school and discovered the violin. I spent a lot of time practicing.

I do recall one last outing at the beginning of September, before school term started. The current bike must have been off the road, as they often were, or else Giles was broke, or both. He considered himself too grown up now for the old games, but he scrambled up the hill anyway, burning off some banked down adolescent drive or other.

It was late afternoon. The sun was low and it had besides the yellowish tint that comes when the summer starts to turn. Everything was very clear and bright with a sharp little shadow under each grass blade. When the fog came sliding up from the shore below I had reached the first line of fortifications and Giles was about 20 yards ahead. It took both of us unawares. I felt a chilly dimming of the light and turned to catch a glimpse of a landscape across which someone had drawn a wet brush in a series of broad, melting strokes - and then only a circle of grass and a

COLD HILLSIDE

shredding, drifting blank just out of arm's reach.

Nothing new, of course. Only the first Channel fog of the autumn, two or three weeks earlier than usual. But I was acutely aware of the slope in front of me – if it was still in front of me – not steep enough to be dangerous but good for some nasty bruises. I sat down on the ridge of the outermost rampart and waited for Giles to come. I was facing downhill, I thought, although the earth wall fell away in both directions. I had been facing that way when the mist came up and I was pretty sure I had not turned. Or not by much. At any rate, not through 180 degrees, surely?

My sweater was already covered with a sheen of tiny droplets clinging to the wool. I tucked my knees up against my chest and tugged the jumper down over them, then pulled the neck up over my nose so that my breath warmed the space between shirt and skin. Giles would shout, I thought. Somehow I did not like to myself. The shifting roils of moisture all round me gave the impression that they were holding back something. Any number of things. If I called out, what might not answer?

Normal hilltop sounds were deadened by the fog. They were faint enough at the best of times – scattered sheep calling, the distant racket of rooks squabbling down in the valley – but now their absence was startling, a sort of silent background roar shaped by the slope of the land.

“I remember...”

I fixed my eyes on a half-dead thistle clinging to the chalk below me. Its leaves were a brownish-green with brittle white patches, but the spines were still sharp.

“...Callous bastard he was, always down on us. Dig this, clean that... Chucked his guts up on the boat, though, eh? Laugh...?”

I closed my eyes tight, but that was worse. The fog seemed to be seeping into my brain.

“...took it out of our hides after. Two sodding days in full kit, pint of

MARTIN COOPER

water per man at noon... Got his up north, I heard. Arrow in the gut crossing a river, current caught his shield, dragged him in deep. Not a soul moved to help...

Bat-squeak voices of the hills rehearsing snatches of an ancient argument.

"There were good times. Warm days... I remember berries in the thorn bushes on an autumn morning... spinners' webs in the grass. Following the Eagle knee-high through the mist..."

"...sore feet, pack chafing, water trickling down your neck..."

"...sharing a girl in the firelight, flames reflected on the branches above..."

"...sharing aching balls and dripping cock a week later..."

"Before we marched up from the south they were full of stories... Tales of ice and sleet... warriors who painted their bodies and threw themselves naked onto the shield wall... And we found a grey-green land of mist and small rain... Chalk and clay and furze..."

"And women who would smile and smile as they spread their legs, then cut your throat as you slept after."

"How not? We killed their men and fired the thatch."

"I remember. Smoke blowing in your eyes, kids and cattle screaming. Crows circling."

"But they did for us in the end. Too many towns, too many marches, too tired, too long. Sooner or later. Laying in wood for the cookhouse fires, before the weather closed in. Foraging on the edge of the trees. An arrow out of the dark."

"Half-hearted skirmish outside some piss-poor little village. A dozen smoke-filled huts and a midden. A nick on the thigh – only a scratch, but it turned bad."

"Half a lifetime holding down some godless frontier. For a lump of chalk on your belly and a square of turf on your face. Bed on a cold hillside."

"Ten thousand pounds for saving your life!" Giles grabbed me under the arms and swung me out over the drop. The fog had lifted and a Technicolor sunset blazed up from the metallic

COLD HILLSIDE

sea below us. I must have screamed because he dumped me back on the ground and pranced around me laughing.

“Did I give you a fright? I did, didn’t I? Ha! You were well away – cloud cuckoo land. Cuckoo! Hey – are you all right? It was only a joke.”

“Did you hear them?” I was still breathless.

“Who? Nobody here but you, me and the sheep. You need to wake up a bit – I can’t believe you didn’t hear me coming.”

“Men... soldiers... I don’t know. They were whispering. In the fog.”

“Don’t know where they’ve got to then.” He waved his arm and it was true. We could see for miles. Not a living soul. “You’ve been seeing things. Hearing things.”

We looked at one another and he must have seen something out of the ordinary in my pale face because his smile flickered. Then he plunged away down the slope, yelling at the top of his voice.

“Last one down’s a wanker,” I shouted and dived after him. It was a word I had recently discovered.

I forgot about it very quickly, until a few years ago when I was walking near the camp again, down for the weekend. The sun was setting, with horizontal strokes of cloud across an outrageous brazen sky, and the voices came back to me.

At least, I think they did. Memories gain a patina from handling and sometimes it is hard to see the original pattern at all. Is it actually the childhood faces you remember, or the photographs in the family album? Song writing can be like that. A chance remark from the past gives you the first phrase but after that the words and the melody become the memory. Well. Whether or not I heard them calling to me then, an infant Captain Cat, they were clear enough three decades later. When I got back to London I wrote a tune for them. Fiddle and voice over a low drone from a concertina. A girl I knew at the time

MARTIN COOPER

told me it used to make the small hairs stand up on the back of her neck.

It still goes down well after the interval, when everyone has had a drink or two.

5

The dog is back. It flops at our feet and starts rooting for fleas while Randall too pries and probes and gives nothing away.

“Let’s walk,” I say. The dog’s getting bored.”

I lead the way across the parking area towards the woods. There is a kissing gate in the fence around the car park. I open it halfway and the dog wriggles through then disappears again. I look back and Randall has not moved. He is watching me and his eyes have a glassy look. I think he wears contact lenses. He does not say anything and in his dark suit he looks like a third crow. Three for... what? Something very bad indeed. He glances down at his shoes – lightweight brogues, not made for muddy country rambles – and follows. Perhaps the man is worried about getting his feet wet.

Once through the gate we walk in single file for a while, then, remembering that I am the one with the wellies, I step off the path onto the grass.

“Your brother had a drink problem.”

We are walking two abreast now, with me beside the track making occasional detours to avoid trees. Up ahead a heavy branch has fallen half across the path and I drop back to allow Randall through the gap.

“He didn’t have a drink *problem*. He drank because he liked it.”

“He must have liked it a lot. Did he drive afterwards?”

“No, never. He had a bad fright a few years ago, I think.

COLD HILLSIDE

Most of the time he either scrounged a lift or called a taxi.”

“What kind of fright?”

“No idea. He didn’t go into it.” And why should I tell you anyway?

“Spend a lot of money on fares, did he?”

“Not that much. He was good fun. People enjoyed his company.”

6

The more some men have to drink, the larger their clothes get, have you noticed?

Giles had taken a skinful, judging by the size of his trousers, which were bagging at the knees, the waistband slipping down below his belly and threatening to part company with his shirt. His jacket looked like a family hand-me-down, several sizes too big. Perhaps he would grow into it. The band had been working the guests for about an hour and now, as they ripped into *Blue Suede Shoes*, things were getting sweaty. Giles, as ever, was in a class of his own. He jiggled, splay-footed, in the centre of the crowd, arms raised above his head, fingers snapping, not dancing with any particular partner but turning to face any female who came near him in the crush. A few yards away my sister-in-law Sheila was surrounded by a crowd of children, doing something which looked like the hokey cokey. I stood at the bar, nursing an orange juice, admiring the bass player’s fingering and the shoulder blades of a girl a few feet away. The three of us had tossed to see whose car we would come in. Foregone conclusion.

“So many people. How come they know so many people? I could get most of my friends into a Volkswagen.”

The man beside me was one of the few not wearing a dinner

MARTIN COOPER

jacket. His pale green suit and dark shirt gave him a faintly menacing air of intellectual thuggishness, accentuated by steel-rimmed glasses.

Probably still have room for a couple of hitch-hikers, I thought.

“Young Farmers,” I said.

“Not so young any more.”

“That’s true.”

“You a friend of the groom?” he asked.

“The bride. We were at school together.”

Polly was looking amazing. She was always pretty stunning, even in the jeans, sweatshirt and Wellingtons which made up her normal workday gear, but tonight she outshone everyone. And so she should. Rich, antique cream skirts swirled around her as she danced and the deep red velvet bodice, held up as far as I could see by willpower alone, drew the light down onto honey-coloured shoulders and arms. White was for wimps, she said. She caught my eye over her partner’s shoulder and waved. Her hair was piled on top of her head and she seemed all neck and collar bone.

Damn. How did I miss out there? Not that the question had ever arisen. We had been friends since she started school, several years younger than me, and her mother had driven us the 10 miles to the nearest town each day. Plenty of affection, but no spark. One of those things.

“You’re local, then? You don’t sound it.” My neighbour was in the mood for conversation.

“We don’t all have straws in our hair.”

“Dear me. Ethnic sensitivities.”

I grinned at him. “Actually, I’ve lived in London for ages. You lose the buzz pretty quickly if you know what’s good for you. *They Lannon volk looks down their noses at us Darsset lads.* Nowadays I just come down to clear my lungs. My brother has

COLD HILLSIDE

the farm next to Polly's new husband."

"Not for much longer."

"No indeed."

Polly and her new husband Mark had, in fact, been living together for several years. He was making an honest woman of her before they both went back to Australia, his native land. I did not know him well as he had moved into the area long after I had left. Now he was moving on again and taking my friend with him. No money in British farming, he said, and I would have agreed with him, except that he seemed to have done well out of it. They had bought a part share in a New South Wales vineyard.

"You're a friend of Mark's?" I asked.

"Business associate. And I don't mind telling you that his leaving is a pain in the arse. Do you know what the new owners are doing with the land? Golf course. Cliff-top bloody golf course. I ask you!"

"Pretty impressive hazard."

"It's bloody ridiculous. Mind you, there's no danger of balls falling in the sea – the wind will carry them for miles inland."

"You seem to be taking it very personally."

"It is personal. My firm was onto a good thing there. Sorry – I run a package holiday company. We specialise in survival courses, among other things. Get in touch with your inner self by eating worms for a week. There are a couple of combs along that bit of coast which could be a hundred miles from anywhere. Not even a track leading down to them. We land the punters by sea in the middle of the night and they love it. Don't tell them about the pub over the hill until the last day."

That might explain the vineyard, I thought.

I remembered a spot on the edge of our own farm when we were kids. A short, curving valley opening out onto the shingle, overgrown woodland sheltered by the headland, good for

MARTIN COOPER

nothing much except rabbits. My father occasionally talked about cutting the timber, but access was too difficult. It would have cost more to haul the trees out than the lumber yard would have paid for them. To us boys it was mainly memorable for its name: Charity Bottom. Where you going, lads? Up Charity Bottom. Ho, ho, ho. I wondered if the woods were still there. The price of timber might have risen enough by now for Giles to have it logged.

The band were taking a break. Sheila's entourage dragged her towards the buffet. Giles and Polly came arm in arm off the dance floor, heads together, giggling. Polly saw me standing at the bar and steered her companion in my direction.

"When are you going to play for us, Simon?"

"Whenever you're ready. The question is, has Matt brought his box? I haven't seen him yet."

"He's only just got here. Some tiresome client had a crisis."

Matt and I had been musical partners throughout our school-days, constants in a shifting combination of guitars, drums and occasionally voices that lasted for five years or more until A Levels left us high and dry and needing to earn a living. Since then the relationship had gradually become more formal. He gave me legal advice when I needed it. I paid him when I could. But we still played together when we had the chance.

"OK. Let's find him, then go and talk to the band, see what their plans are."

Polly transferred herself to my arm and we left Giles and his new friend trying to attract the barman's attention.

"What do you think of Sam Crawford?" Polly asked.

"Is that his name? We didn't get that far. He's pretty pissed off that you and Mark are leaving."

"He gives me the creeps. He was paying plenty for permission to run his outward-bound thingy down by the beach, but he's one of the few people I won't be sorry to leave behind."

COLD HILLSIDE

“What do his clients do on their package holiday?”

“Lord knows. Part of the deal is that nobody goes down there when there’s a course on. They’re supposed to be castaways, or something. I heard them charging around in the middle of the night once, when we were out lambing.”

“Really? Not fair weather campers, then?” My memories of lambing were mostly cold and wet.

“Nope. Bunch of masochists. They do clean up after themselves, I will say that for them. You wouldn’t know they’d been there. But I suppose they have to do that or the next lot would find Man Friday footprints all over the place.”

We found Matt disposing of his coat, what looked like a fat suitcase at his feet.

“Polly.” A hug for the bride. “I’m so sorry I’m late. Some malicious old biddy changing her will for the tenth time. She’s loaded, unfortunately, so the junior partner has to traipse out to her place and listen to the latest sins of her relatives. I’m surprised none of them has slipped arsenic in her sherry already. Simon.”

For me, a handshake, warm but professional. Matt looked like what he now was: a successful solicitor, becoming prosperous, still youngish to a charitable eye, but with maturity in sight. I wondered what he saw when he looked at me in my hired dinner jacket.

“I didn’t think modern firms did the ancient family retainer bit any more,” I said.

He pulled a face. “I heard that too. Remind me to apply for a job in one.”

The band had found themselves beers and were gathered in a corner. Their kit was stacked around them and power cables from the house snaked under the canvas side of the marquee and across the coir matting that covered the floor. They were local lads, Polly said, making a name for themselves round about

MARTIN COOPER

but still hanging onto the day jobs. I remembered the feeling – rehearsing two or three evenings a week, playing on Saturday nights and reaping a little local celebrity. Getting through the days on dreams.

Their singer was compact and energetic in black T-shirt. He had a gymnasium physique, close-cropped dark hair and a single ear ring and he looked at our bow ties dubiously while Polly explained that we were old friends who were going to play a few tunes. His eyebrows went up even further when Matt opened the case he had lugged across the dance floor and the light caught the chrome and ivory of the accordion. I could read his mind. *What's this? Old farts' request night?*

The bass player drifted over.

“Didn’t I see you at Cropredy last year?” he said, frowning at me.

“You may have done.”

“That’s right, I remember. You played with that Scottish lot on the Saturday afternoon. Brilliant set, it was. People were dancing in the rain. I think I bought a CD after. You’re not going to play now, are you? Any chance of sitting in?”

The Cropredy gig had been the result of a chance contact while I was doing a day’s session work at the BBC, incidental music for a radio drama. The fiddle player with the Scottish lot was expecting a baby the weekend of the festival. Its father was beginning to fret about being onstage with her in a field in the middle of rural Oxfordshire. As it turned out his daughter was about an hour old by the time we counted in for the first number and her head had been fairly well wetted. Privately I thought this explained a good deal of the afternoon’s sparkle, but whatever the reason it was a memorable session. Sometimes things come together of their own accord, and nobody can put a foot wrong.

I left Matt and the bass player roughing out a play list and

COLD HILLSIDE

went to get my fiddle from the car. In the bar Giles and Sam Crawford were still talking, Crawford drawing diagrams on the counter top with his finger. Giles waved as I went past and looked comparatively sober.

When I got back the singer was feeling happier. They had decided to include a couple of Dylan songs. Could I do a sort of Cajun backing? I could, no problem. The group's drummer had unearthed a bodhran.

“Bought it from a bloke in a bar. I've been carrying it around for ages, giving it a rattle now and then. Never had a chance to use it yet.”

Matt and I kicked off as we always used to when we played in the local pubs. A firm, rhythmic melody on the accordion, the fiddle sliding in after a few bars with a gentle counter-melody. Let them know we're here, Matt used to say. Give them time to collect their pints and settle down. Then a change of key and a sharp increase in tempo to get the feet tapping. We'd still been at school then, technically under age, but the old magic still worked.

So we played. Jigs and reels, now and then a slow air or blues. And, remarkably, the people danced. The not-so-young farmers and their wives, the daughters and their slicked-down boy-friends, the feed merchants and the farriers, the livestock agents and the agricultural machinery dealers; even the councillors and the magistrates and the hack from the local rag. Giles emerged from the bar, clothes miraculously re-tailored, and squired Sheila while Crawford's eyes followed him up and down. There's no beating the old tunes.

Finally, very late, Matt and I played the waltz we had written for Polly. Mark wafted her round the dim floor, through the departing fug of spilt beer, sweat and cigar smoke. Round the dim floor and out of our lives.

MARTIN COOPER

7

“He kept several cars,” Randall says. “He must have driven them sometimes.”

“Of course he did. One of them was mine, for when I came down. I usually come on the train, sitting in traffic is such a waste of time. His wife used to drive the BMW, until she left. He used the four wheel drive. If there were any others they were being renovated. There’s a kid down in the village did a lot of work for him. Brilliant mechanic, but no head for business.”

Randall stops and looks at me. I elaborate.

“Classic cars. That’s one of the ways Giles made his money. He sold a tank once, to an American collector. Found it in Eastern Europe somewhere. You wouldn’t believe the trouble he had shipping it over. Well... perhaps you would. Telephone boxes were much easier. Californians use them as poolside showers, did you know that? I daresay the smell of piss fades after a while.”

“So. Dorset’s answer to Arthur Daley.”

“Not really. Giles was good at it.”

8

The café was in a part of Islington which in those days was only recently gentrified, yet to become the home turf of cabinet ministers. It was newly opened, renovated in a style designed to convey intellectual smartness. Spotlights; bare sanded boards, freshly varnished; walls stripped of plaster and wire brushed down to the brick; good quality light pine furniture; piles of newspapers and magazines on a window seat. Guardian and TLS. London Review of Books and New Yorker. Sporting Life

COLD HILLSIDE

for the tainted breath of the real world.

Giles, in town for the day, bit into a huge sandwich, salad and cooked meats piled on grainy brown bread.

“Hm... pretty good. But their portions are too big. They’ll go bust within six months, you wait. Eighty per cent of independent food outlets last less than a year, did you know that? It’s poor portion control that does ‘em in, every time.”

I nodded towards the counter where the owner, dressed in a blue and white butcher’s apron, was busy arranging six different kinds of olive in the chiller cabinet. “Give him a few hints.”

Giles glanced up, then turned his attention back to the sandwich. “No point. He’s got a picture in his head of what he wants to do, and it isn’t make money... He wants the buzz of conversation and the smell of fresh coffee. Booker prize-winners sitting for a couple of hours over a single cappuccino. Well, he may get that, who knows.”

“He may manage to turn a profit as well.”

“Doubt it. People get their heart’s desire, on the whole. Usually it doesn’t seem like it because what they get is *exactly* what they hanker after. If they don’t get rich it’s because they don’t want wealth badly enough to go to the trouble. What they value is style or glamour or power or security... Whatever. Heart’s desire.”

“Whereas you, on the other hand...?”

“Whereas I, on the other hand, know that money is my ticket to the future. Whatever I am hungry for I may achieve without it, but money will help me keep it. If mine host were a wealthy man he could give two fingers to his landlord and his suppliers – as it is they’ll be dunning him for the cost of that smoked salmon before the end of the year. I dare say he knows all this perfectly well intellectually, but he doesn’t *believe* it. In his heart he’s settled for being the man of taste for a few weeks. He’s not prepared to beg and lie and steal for it. Come on, we’ll just have

MARTIN COOPER

time for a look round before the bidding starts.”

The auction rooms were a bit of a let down. If nothing else I had expected the place to have a kind of scholarly dignity. In the event it struck me as shabby, chaotic and untidy, the rooms taking their cue from the rumpled men who appeared to pass their days rooting along the shelves of books. Seen outside a school playground some of them would have been arrested on the spot. Others had a watchfulness which reminded me more of the market stall than the country house library.

Even the building was unpromising. Yellow brick and concrete, thrown up in the 1960s in the semi-industrial wasteland behind one of the great London stations, probably plugging a bombed-out gap. The exterior was thick with traffic grime and the windows looked as if they had not been washed since the place was built. Not that it mattered. All you could see through the crusted glass were the blank backs of shelving stacks and piles of yellow newspapers.

We went down a couple of steps into a foyer with marbled floor and discreetly lit display cabinets. This would have been more inspiring, were it not for the pile of cardboard boxes in one corner, broken down flat and strapped into bundles. Down a few more steps and into the auction room proper we passed a reception desk where a girl was dispensing pieces of card with large numbers pasted on them. Giles left me to “grab one of those” and drifted off. I signed my name and took my 56.

Inside there was a smell of dust and old glue and occasionally a faint whiff of damp. The walls were covered with shelving on which books were ranked, separate lots identified by slips of pink paper with spidery pencilled writing at the top. Fifty or sixty chairs had been arranged in the centre of the room, facing a sort of raised pulpit at one end as if for a prayer meeting. A couple of people were already seated, reading their catalogues, but most were standing in front of the shelves, taking down volumes and

COLD HILLSIDE

riffling rapidly through the pages. This was known as “sniffing” a book, according to Giles.

“No idea what they’re looking for, though. I think it’s a sort of pose, part of their professional credentials.” He glanced at a passing bibliophile. “Along with the anorak and broken spectacles.”

This was a scouting trip, Giles said, but evidently not his first because one or two people nodded to him as he sauntered round. He stopped here and there, scanning the titles, but he did not take any of them down. If anything, he seemed to be more interested in the other dealers. Several times I saw him hover indecisively next to one or other of them and it occurred to me that he was not looking at the shelves. He was making a note of which books they had put back.

After about 20 minutes the older sister of the girl at reception appeared at a raised desk to one side of the of the pulpit and there was a general drift towards the chairs. Giles passed me a catalogue.

“Do a bit of bidding for the lots I’ve marked, but try not to get stuck with anything. I’ve scribbled in some prices – you should be safe enough if you don’t go beyond those.”

I found myself a chair about halfway back and Giles parked himself against a table at the side of the room and towards the front, from where he had a clear view of the buyers as well as the auctioneer. Four or five other men had taken up similar positions round the room. They seemed to have more of the market trader about them than most. It struck me that Giles was a trader too. Dressed for another setting, perhaps – he had come up in his best off-duty county gear: cords, brown brogues, sweater over soft, check cotton shirt – but predatory like the others. I could picture him in a harder age, rolling grain between his palms, leaning on a rail to watch horses turn and trot, glancing indifferently towards the slaver’s block.

MARTIN COOPER

The auctioneer stepped up onto the rostrum, a middle-aged man in his father's three-piece suit, complete with watch chain and seals. He was slightly over weight, but it gave him a prosperous look. Come from a better lunch than our sandwich, probably, but no doubt the restaurateur who welcomed him to his table would be feeling the wind before long. No hammer, I noticed, rather disappointed. Instead a thing like a wooden egg which he tossed from hand to hand while he watched the last stragglers take their seats. In a corner a young man in brown overalls picked up the first lot and turned to face the buyers, holding the two books displayed in front of his chest. The younger sister was talking quietly on the telephone. The auctioneer looked towards her and raised his eyebrows. She nodded.

“Ladies and gentlemen, lot number one. Colonel James Abbott: *Narrative of a Journey from Heraut to Khiva, Moscow and St Petersburg. 1843. First edition in two volumes. Original cloth.* I have five hundred pounds. Five fifty, thank you. I have six hundred... With me at six hundred... Six fifty on the telephone.”

After an hour or so I had successfully failed to buy two or three dusty bundles and was beginning to enjoy myself. Bidding was an absurdly exciting game played with dead pan face and a variety of twitches. I did not see any of my colleagues tap his nose and wink but it would not have seemed at all out of place. More professional credentials, no doubt. Most of the lots had reserve prices on them, or else there were postal bids, so that the auctioneer seemed to be competing with himself half the time. Sometimes one or other of his staff got involved. Then he would announce “*In the room now...*” and a frisson would run along the rows of chairs. I wanted to jump up and down. *A thousand! Two thousand!* But I nodded and shook my head gravely and tried to look bored along with the rest of them.

Then my luck ran out. I was bidding for a lot which included a couple of Siegfried Sassoon first editions, and still well within

COLD HILLSIDE

the limit Giles had set, when the opposition melted away and the gavel came down.

“Sold to the gentleman in the centre for £350. Your number sir?”

I gaped at him, then held up my 56. I was aware of Giles grinning broadly on the sidelines, but managed to avoid catching his eye. I made no offer at all for the next couple of items he had marked in the catalogue.

A little later brown overalls placed an unsold book back on the shelves and turned to a colleague who handed him a large leather-bound volume which he had taken from a glass display case. The auctioneer twinkled at us.

“Now, ladies and gentlemen, one of the most important items this afternoon. A fine copy of Christopher Saxton’s *Atlas of England and Wales*. First edition, early issue, 1579. Folio, with 13 hand-coloured maps, an engraved frontispiece of Elizabeth I with hand-coloured border and the royal arms tipped in. I’m going to start the bidding at £30,000.” There was a collective sigh from the less affluent dealers who sat back, resigned to being spectators. One day.

“Will anyone give me thirty-one thousand? Thank you sir. Thirty-two thousand... Thirty three... Thirty four... Thirty five... With me at £35,000. Thirty-six on the phone. Thirty-seven at the back...”

The postal bids he had spread on the desktop in front of him seemed to peter out at around £40,000. There was a brief tussle between the anonymous buyer on the telephone and a tousled young man sitting alone in one of the rearmost seats, then, in an office somewhere on the other side of the world perhaps, or possibly only a mile away in the City, the remote buyer lost his nerve. The girl holding the receiver listened and shook her head.

“With the gentleman at the back, then, at £46,000. Will anyone give me forty-seven? Forty-seven, anyone? No? Selling, in

MARTIN COOPER

that case, at £46,000.”

Eyes alert for last minute signals round the room, the auctioneer lifted his left hand to bring down the gavel. A few places along from me a thin, languid man raised a nicotine-stained finger.

“Forty-seven. Thank you. Still bidding at £47,000.” The auctioneer smiled towards the back of the room. “It’s against you, sir. No?” Another quick scan of the rows of chairs. “No more?”

“And five.”

A familiar voice from my left. Giles. Some scouting trip.

My neighbour looked irritated and peered over his glasses at my brother, who sat with one hip perched on the table, swinging his leg gently. The auctioneer seemed dubious and his staff were looking Giles over with some care. They would know him again.

“Thank you. I am bid £47,500. Do I hear forty-eight? Yes? Forty-eight from Ibsen & Church.” My neighbour was an institution, then. Giles seemed oblivious.

“And five.”

“Forty-eight, five... Forty-nine.”

“And five.”

“Forty-nine, five... Forty-nine, five... With the gentleman on my right. Will anyone give me fifty? Fifty thousand, anyone?” The auctioneer raised his gavel again, his eyes on Ibsen & Church, while that venerable partnership ground its teeth. Giles swung his leg.

The partnership nodded abruptly.

“Fifty thousand. Thank you. I am bid £50,000.” To Giles, affable but still with the faintest hint of concern: “Against you, sir. Any advance on £50,000?”

Giles studied his toecap for a second, looked blandly at my rigid neighbour and shook his head.

COLD HILLSIDE

“Very well then, selling to Ibsen & Church for £50,000.” And at last the gavel came down.

Within half an hour the sale was over. Buyers split into small groups, discussing prices and exchanging information about other sales. Or so I supposed. They were probably talking about where to go for a drink. I sidled along the row and found Giles.

“Well done,” he said. He did not look at all put out at my losing several hundred pounds of his money. At least, I hoped it was his money. The sale had been in my name, I remembered.

“Don’t worry about the Sassoon. We can probably split the lot with the people who were bidding against you. The rest can go to Oxfam on the way home.”

“Have you *got* £50,000?” I murmured, aware that this sort of question might not be welcome bellowed across a saleroom.

“Well, not on me, no. I could probably raise it.”

“*Raise it!* What were you going to do? Hock Sheila’s jewels?”

“You had me worried for a minute there, my friend.”

We both turned and found that we were being addressed by the successful purchaser of Saxton’s Atlas. Standing he seemed even thinner than before since he topped us both by three or four inches. He was impeccably dressed, with a light dusting of dandruff on his shoulders. One hand held a cigarette, unlit in deference to the NO SMOKING signs on every wall.

“Barry Church,” he said, extending his free hand to Giles. “No relation actually, but I sometimes pretend.”

“Giles Coltraine. Simon Coltraine. We are related. Yes, it was a pity. But 50K was my ceiling unfortunately.”

“Happens to us all from time to time. I don’t suppose you’re at liberty to say who you were buying for?”

Giles shook his head.

“Afraid not. American academic.”

“Ah, really? No, no, I quite understand. Worth a couple of thousand to keep it in the country, then. Well, it’s been a

MARTIN COOPER

pleasure meeting you. I'm sure we'll run into one another again."

"I'm sure we will."

Church nodded and moved away, not looking entirely pleased at the prospect. Giles watched him.

"Did you realise that the kid at the back of the room was also working for Ibsen? I've seen them do it before. His job was to run up the price a bit and see off the riff-raff. Then our friend there steps in and makes a quick, decisive purchase. Everyone's commission is a bit bigger, everyone's happy. Except whoever Ibsen & Church, Est. 1856, are representing, I suppose. But it's probably some college library which won't give a damn one way or the other."

"You didn't have a buyer, did you?"

"Of course not. I just wanted them to know that I was a player. Let's get rid of the stuff you got landed with."

All that afternoon, I had not thought to ask him what he was hungry for.

9

"Post-mortem report said he must have put away half a bottle of gin." Randall is watching his feet, avoiding the worst of the mud.

"That wasn't like him."

"More than usual?"

"Well, no..." I consider it. "I meant the gin. He didn't like it much. He drank whisky or wine."

"Hm. The thing is, most of it was still in his stomach. Blood alcohol was only just over the limit. He must have downed the lot in – what? – the half hour or so before the accident? Not much more. After phoning you perhaps. Why did he call?"

"I've no idea. He didn't say anything special – big brother

COLD HILLSIDE

stuff. What's the audience like? Good luck and don't trip over the amps. That sort of thing. We used to phone each other all the time."

"How often?"

"Oh... I don't know. Couple of times a week?"

"When you were playing?"

"Sometimes. If he knew. We didn't live in each other's pockets."

"Had he been drinking that night, when you spoke to him?"

"How should I know? We spoke on the phone for two minutes. I was in a room full of people. I had other things to think about. All right, no, there was no sign of it – but I couldn't exactly smell his breath."

"It's quite difficult," Randall says. "Drinking that much gin that quickly. You have to be serious about it."

10

The call from the police came at ten in the morning. The Salisbury gig had been followed by a couple of pints with friends from the other bands, followed in turn by a curry and a long drive back to London. I had not expected to be drawing the curtains much before midday.

Instead, the sudden clamour of the phone and, only a couple of breaths away from sleep, a formal voice in my ear, sympathetic but accustomed. *Accident... Your brother...* Then cab to Waterloo and twenty minutes spent dodging weekend trippers on the station concourse. So much space above your head in those old mainline stations, great bubbles of glass and brick built to contain funnelling smoke and steam. Finally tickets and a hunt along the platforms and the train rocking interminably into the south-west. I left the lid on my coffee to stop it slopping.

MARTIN COOPER

The tabloids had launched a new anti-terrorist witch hunt. The papers on the table top in front of me were full of pictures from the archives, blurred stills from CCTV cameras: young men with rucksacks full of explosives. Headlines shouted outrage at some new security failing. I did not read them. The coffee went cold.

Much later, after questions and forms and watery tea, some of the business still unfinished because of the weekend, I took a taxi out to the farm.

Mrs Sims heard the engine and appeared at the door while the driver was still struggling with the gate. She was holding the dog by its collar but let it go as soon as the car had pulled up in the yard. As I climbed out of the back seat the collie began its usual welcoming dance, bouncing stiff-legged up and down and crying for attention.

“Hello Meg. Get down. Get *down* for goodness sake. Good girl. Hello Mrs Sims.”

“Oh Simon, I’m so sorry.”

She had her coat on and I remembered that she only normally came up from the village on weekdays. A couple of hours a day to keep the place civilised, according the Giles. She had known us since we were kids and now her eyes were red as she reached up to give me a peck on the cheek.

“The police were round this morning asking for your phone number. I thought I’d better come up and fetch Meggie. She’s had a run. Do you want me to keep her for a bit?”

“No, that’s all right. Let her stay here with me for the time being.”

“All right – she’ll be company for you I expect. But do say if you want us to take her later on. Giles often used to leave her when he was away. Oh dear... I expect you’d like some tea.”

I paid the taxi driver and followed her into the warmth of the hall, a kindly woman keeping disaster at arm’s length with milk and sugar.

COLD HILLSIDE

“It was such a shock, police car at the front gate like that. I mean, I thought at first it must be our Georgie when I saw them coming up the path.” Her son Georgie was a grown man of my age, with children of his own and a small building business, well thought of. He had been wild when he was young.

“Funny how it’s always bad news. You get a policeman knocking at your front door and you don’t think ‘I’ve won the lottery!’ do you?”

“What did they say?”

“Oh, only that there’d been an accident, and did I know how they could contact Mrs Coltraine. Of course, I said that she hadn’t lived up at the farm for several years, and I thought she’d moved to America. So they asked if there were any other relatives, and I gave them your number.”

“I’d better phone Sheila, I suppose. Nothing about the accident?”

“No. Well... They did ask if Giles was much of a drinker. I said he liked a glass, but never when he was driving. I don’t think they believed me. Do you know what did happen?”

“Not really. The car came off the road late last night, but nobody else seems to have been involved. Someone spotted the wreck early this morning.” I looked round. “Any sign that he *had* been drinking?”

“Not unless he washed up after himself. That wouldn’t be like him.”

I spent what was left of the afternoon and most of the evening walking from room to room, sitting, looking, feeling nothing much except the threat of something ready to open beneath me, like a crevasse beneath a snow bridge. Everything was tidy, normal. I expected to find a note on the kitchen table: *Welcome. Back about seven. Wine in fridge.* As it started to get dark and the central heating boiler in the kitchen came alive with a thump I drew the curtains and turned on a few reading lamps.

MARTIN COOPER

The house was the one I had grown up in, transformed by Giles's occupation. I had become accustomed to the changes long ago, and in any case they had accumulated piecemeal over the years. It was only occasionally, when there was a particularly long interval between visits, that I noticed them at all. Now, with his absence hanging over everything, the whole place seemed strange.

I opened a bottle of wine – it was indeed waiting in the fridge – and sat for a while in one of the armchairs that Giles insisted were the heart of a real kitchen. I could just remember my mother working there, holding back the tide of mud, hay, cow-shit and Wellingtons with sandbags of Dettol. It was a much bigger room now, a scullery and various larders knocked through, with recessed lighting and polished wood surfaces. The chipped old Aga I remembered, a grimy cream monster that had to be fed with coal twice a day, had been replaced by another, even bigger, red and chrome and oil fired. Brown lino, patched by the back door, was long gone. For a while there had been sanded boards, then a couple of years earlier stone flags had appeared with some heating arrangement underneath, so that they were always warm.

It was a long time before I could bring myself to go into his bedroom.

I stood on the landing outside, looking at a picture on the wall. It was an old Royal Academy poster framed in ash, a water-colour of a Greenland falcon. One wing had been spread out like a specimen to show all the flight feathers, but its eye was bright and alive and wary. I drifted into my own room. It was the one I had occupied when I was a child. Giles kept it for me but it was impersonal now, boy's clutter long since thrown away. Fresh wallpaper and curtains looked odd alongside the familiar shelves and sloping ceiling. Under the new paint, though, the wooden windowsill still showed the long gouge I had burned out

COLD HILLSIDE

with my father's shaving mirror. My bag was unopened on the bed. In the bathroom next door there was a faint smell of Giles's aftershave and a single toothbrush.

I don't know what I expected when I finally pushed his door open. Some speaking sense of his personality. But there was nothing. Mrs Sims had passed by and everything was tidy and dusted, shirts ironed in the wardrobe, socks rolled in pairs in a top drawer. On one wall several groups of Victorian great-grandparents waited stiffly for the photographer to release them. The bookshelves were full of his favourites, old editions, some of them, probably valuable. There were also several of Sheila's books, still looking fresh from the publisher.

His reading glasses were lying on the bedside table. I picked them up and sat on the edge of the bed. He had chosen them because they made him look harmless - I remembered how he used to blink over the gold framed half-lenses. He loved to mislead.

Finally, in great, helpless, breathless gulps, the tears came.

Fairly late, I went downstairs and turned on the stereo. There was a CD already in the drive and it started automatically, filling the living room with the drone of a concertina, very soft. Then the fiddle. Then the girl's voice, phrases fading, lost in the shadows:

*Too many battles, too many loads,
Old wounds carried down too many roads
To a bed on a cold hillside.*

Giles had gone to his death with my song in his ears.

CHAPTER TWO

1

Wednesday evening, ten past nine. A draughty church hall in north London and the band are experiencing artistic differences.

“I am not singing that song and if you don’t like it you can shove it up your arse.”

Bridie is 24 years old, small and skinny with freckles and a mass of wiry red hair which she normally wears, as now, tied back in a rigid bunch. On stage she lets it loose and it flies around her head like a halo of fire. Her voice can sound as pure and clear as a cathedral choirboy’s or it can blister paint. At the moment she is in blowtorch mode.

“Bridie, it’s a great song.”

“It’s the kind of thing the men sing in Ireland to make themselves feel like romantic heroes instead of the sadistic morons they really are. Simon, you’re not going to make us do this shit, surely?”

MARTIN COOPER

“Jesus Simon, what is this?”

I can see why Steve wants to sing it. He has the brooding glamour of the black Celt and he can probably already picture himself in a lager advert on TV, epitome of New York Irish cool. In fact, he comes from Kent and as far as I know his family have been hop growers for five generations. A nice tenor voice with a good range and not a bad guitarist. Not a great one.

Bridie is different. Her parents both came from Northern Ireland, mother Catholic, father Protestant. The threats started a week after they met and they left the country after her father had two ribs broken on his own doorstep. Bridie was born and brought up in Cornwall and none of the family has ever been back.

I feel old. Come to think of it, I am old compared with these two. Old enough to be the father of either of them. But only just. Len, the drummer and even older than I am, catches my expression over Bridie’s shoulder and crosses his eyes briefly. Been there, done that. When can we go to the pub? Ian, the fifth member of the band, fiddles with something electronic attached to his keyboard, not even listening.

“That’s enough, calm down the pair of you. You’re right Steve, it is a great song.” The beginning of a smirk on his face. Out of the corner of my eye I see Bridie take a breath. “But Bridie’s right too, we can’t do it.”

“Oh, for God’s sake.” He takes half a dozen strides down the hall, swinging his guitar as if he is about to throw it. But he does not, I notice.

“Steve, if you want to do a rebel song there are plenty to choose from. I saw a couple of guys do one about Monmouth the other day. By the end of it half the audience wanted to go out and grab a pitchfork.”

“Nobody’s ever heard of Monmouth except a handful of sad old folkies.”

COLD HILLSIDE

“I think that’s Bridie’s point. The beatings are still going on in Ulster, whatever the politicians say. Irish rebel songs are too current. Find something that’s been... defused.”

“What, like she’s defused you? With a quick shag?”

I’ll throttle the bastard, I tell myself. Funeral thoughts have given my temper an edge. No, he’s bigger than me and half my age. *But I’ll bloody throttle him anyway*. Steve steps back. I could swear that he looks frightened.

“Actually, it’s at least six months since Simon and I last slept together.”

There is a snort of laughter from behind the drum kit, where Len is bending down to adjust one of the pedals. Thank you Bridie. I knew I could rely on your support.

2

My family did not go to church much, so I had never paid any attention to the ritual. Certainly I had not realised how exclusive it all was. Waiting for the hearse I found an old prayer book lying around the house.

Here is to be noted that the office ensuing is not to be used for any that die unbaptised, or excommunicate, or have laid violent hands upon themselves.

The church was packed.

I sat in the front pew in a Victorian twilight. Spots hidden among the scrollwork high up on the walls illuminated the painted ceiling but strengthened the gloom of vertical stone below. There were candles and I watched the play of the reflections in the brass. The air felt chilly and damp. Bridie sat beside me and held my hand and squeezed it now and then. She was paler than usual. The skin around her eyes was puffy and her lashes had a clogged look. She had refused to wear black. Instead

MARTIN COOPER

she had on a long stage dress that Giles had admired, a vivid splash of brown and orange and gold.

On the other side sat Sheila. She had flown in dry-eyed from Boston three or four days after my phone call and slipped back into her old place at the farm as if she had never been away. She spoke to Matt, the police, the undertaker and one of the priests who served the church in the village, then set about drawing up lists. Guests, catering requirements, calls to make, people to see. She was good at it and I was glad to leave her to it.

I had stayed on for a couple of days and we walked round the fields and sat in the kitchen and talked, as old friends do, about the past and the future: the band, her teaching in the US, Giles as we had both known him. Not much about the accident.

“Did you see him?” she asked me once. Her voice had acquired a faint American twang.

“Yes. I had to identify him.”

“How did he look?”

“Exactly the same as usual,” I lied. He had not been wearing a seat belt. “Except that there was... nothing there.”

She nodded and poured another glass of wine.

“I’d like to come back here,” she said. “To live, I mean. I was happy here.”

“Good idea. You’ve been away too long.”

“You wouldn’t mind? You were brought up here. It was your home before it was mine.”

“I left ages ago.”

“Not until next year. In the summer maybe. I won’t be missed, there’s half a dozen hungry associate professors itching to get their feet under my desk. Can you cast an occasional eye over the place until then? Mrs Sims will keep things polished, but somebody needs to be in charge. I’ll tell Matt that you have authority to put your name to anything that needs signing. If nothing else, come down and listen to the ghosts.”

COLD HILLSIDE

3

Some of the ghosts had already called.

“Simon, how are you?”

“Andy. Come on in.”

The three men trooped into the kitchen and stood looking round uneasily. They were all in their twenties, big lads, normally pretty noisy probably, but unsure about how to behave in a dead man’s house. And who isn’t? Andy had been working for Giles for years and seemed to have been elected spokesman on that account. He pulled off a pair of woollen gloves and popped open the front of his padded jacket.

“You remember Tod I expect? You won’t know Terry, though – he’s only been around a few months.”

We shook hands. I pointed to chairs.

“Coffee? Beer?”

“No, no. We’ll only be a minute. Thanks though. The thing is... Look, I know this isn’t a good time, and it looks bad us marching in here like this, but we three need to know where we stand. I mean, we’ve all been working for Giles and now... Well, what now?”

“Don’t worry about it – I’d be asking the same question. Er... what was the deal, exactly? Were you employed by him?”

Terry spoke up: “No. That’s the problem. I mean, we worked for him, right enough, there’s no question of that, you can ask anyone. But it was all cash in hand, like.”

“Ah. Did Giles owe you money?”

Terry looked as if he would have liked to say yes. Left to himself he probably would have done, but Andy jumped in.

“No, no. Nothing like that.”

“Um... Did you owe him anything?”

“Not exactly. Except that Terry...”

MARTIN COOPER

“I paid for that stuff!” Terry was looking murderous.

“Hang on, hang on. I’ve lost the plot here. Sit down, have a beer and explain to me how this worked.”

I went over to the fridge and when I returned to the table with bottles in either hand the three of them were ranged down the other side, Terry glowering and Andy in the middle, looking anxious. Tod, who still had not said a word, kept glancing at Andy and seemed content to take his lead.

“OK then, from the top.” I distributed the bottles. “What kind of stuff are we talking about?”

“Well... low-grade antiques, I suppose you could call them.” Andy explained. “Not expensive, but... collectible’s the word nowadays, isn’t it? Tod has regular stalls at a couple of markets selling old tools, for example. You must know the sort of thing – wooden block planes, all that. I do toys – cars, old dolls and bears, my girl friend helps with those. Military medals, a lot of interest there. Anything, really.”

“And Giles used to supply all these?”

“He used to find them, yes. Mostly he wouldn’t handle them himself. One of us would collect them, bring them back here.”

“From where?”

“Oh, sales, house clearances. People get on a bit, kids have left home so they move somewhere smaller, no room for everything... He knew a lot of people.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Yes. Well. On paper, Giles would buy whatever it happened to be and sell it on to us, and *on paper* the mark-up would be small... but by the time it gets to the market stall it’s going for cash and a decent profit and a percentage of that comes – came – back to him.”

“And as much again in your back pockets, I suppose.” Terry stared at me in amazement. Where else would they put it?

Tod spoke up for the first time. “But, see, he helped each one

COLD HILLSIDE

of us get started, and we use one of the barns here as a sort of base. I've never met anybody like him for finding the stuff in the first place. And now my wife's having a baby. I don't see how it's going to work without him."

Nor did I. Guaranteed sales, no wages bill, no National Insurance, most of the profits tax-free and as far as I could see the three lads had done the leg work. They seemed to feel that Giles had done them a favour. Remarkable.

The second apparition arrived the next morning in a red and white 2CV, wipers thrashing against gusting rain that curled like smoke across the fields. A girl got out, slammed the door and ran across the yard to the porch, all legs and elbows, holding a jacket over her head.

"Mr Coltraine?"

"You're lucky to catch me." Sheila's plane was getting in that afternoon and I was supposed to be meeting it. I had despaired of any improvement in the weather and was towelling the dog after a sodden walk along the beach.

"I saw you come back. I was waiting up the lane."

I waved her in and sent the dog to its basket.

"I'm Sharon. The boys asked me to come in and talk to you. They've put a lot of effort into this thing and they're dead worried."

She looked about 14. Curtains of long, straight, brown hair hung on either side of her face and she kept pushing them back behind her ears. Baggy black sweater, tiny skirt and, on the end of matchstick legs, an enormous pair of patent leather boots with thick soles and rows of buckles up the calf. Not a pushover. She would have bobbed upright like one of those weighted toy clowns.

"Ah. You're part of this enterprise too, are you?"

"I'm the office manager." She stared at me, daring me to comment.

MARTIN COOPER

“Um... Don’t take this the wrong way... but how old are you, exactly?”

“Eighteen. Next month if you want it *exactly*. I’ve been working for Giles since I left school. Just over a year. Look, it’s difficult to explain – much easier if I showed you.”

“I’m going out in less than an hour.”

“Won’t take long. Come on, I’ll drive.”

Rocked by every gust of wind, its engine racing like a demented lawnmower, the 2CV bounced along the lane away from the village, then turned off down a track half a mile or so from the house. There had been a barn of sorts in my father’s day. Nothing very elaborate, a fodder store, humped corrugated iron roof and open on two sides. I had not been up there for years. Now it was a solid, weatherproof structure with cladding walls moulded in wide, square-edged grooves and painted a dull red. A power line looped away over soaked fields. At one end a lean-to sheltered tall double doors.

The 2CV could have been taken right inside, but Sharon manoeuvred round a large puddle and jerked to a halt under some dripping guttering. She bounded out, leaving me to grapple with the unfamiliar latch. By the time I had caught up with her she had taken a key from under a brick and was unlocking a narrow door marked *Office*.

There did not seem to be any windows, but while I stood blinking on the threshold Sharon stepped confidently into the gloom and turned on an Anglepoise lamp. I saw computer, printer, desktop photocopier; filing cabinets in the shadows against the wall. She watched me taking it all in, suddenly self-conscious.

“Can I get you anything? Tea, coffee? I brought some fresh milk up yesterday morning. It keeps for ages this time of year. I expect we’ll get a fridge up here eventually. That is, assuming... Well. Never got round to it last summer, we were so busy.”

COLD HILLSIDE

“No thanks, I’m fine. I really haven’t got much time.”

“Right. This is it, then.”

She swept down a row of light switches with the flat of her hand.

Not, after all, a shadowed office. A line of fluorescent tubes buzzed and flickered into life overhead and I saw that there were no walls. The whole of the interior of the barn was a single open space, with an aluminium ladder at the far end leading through a hole in the ceiling to – presumably – an upper level. Open plan had nothing on this. I was standing in a tiny, orderly oasis on the edge of a wilderness of junk.

But as my eyes began to make sense of the space I saw that this was more than the accumulated debris of a few local attics. Everything had been sorted and the floor space was divided into distinct zones. Furniture at the far end by the main doors, pictures and a few ornate but empty frames stacked along one of the walls, a block of steel workshop shelving full of china, a heap of boxes full of books.

Automatically I said: “You shouldn’t store books flat like that, the spines get twisted.”

“Yes, I know. Giles was always telling us. We’ve been meaning to put up some more shelves.”

I had heard the lecture myself, many times.

“We don’t do much furniture. A guy comes over from Bridport twice a month and takes it away. Andy’s got a mate, though, who wants to have a go at stripping. We thought we might add a workshop in the summer. Small stuff is upstairs. Coins, jewellery, watches, old pens. A bit of glass.”

“Where does it all come from?”

She reached over to the desk and handed me a glossy leaflet.

MARTIN COOPER

*Immediate Cash
paid for
old jewellery, silver,
antiques, clocks, books and paintings*

There were pictures of a selection of *Antiques Road Show* items, polished and tastefully arranged, looking valuable.

Private visits and immediate cash offers.

“Who makes the offers?”

“Me. Giles did to begin with. Then he started taking me along. I’ve been doing it on my own for ages now. People trust a girl, he says. Said.”

“In those boots?”

“I’ve got some nice, sensible shoes.”

She had a point. Our Terry would get the door slammed in his face every time. And there would always be a few people who would let her in thinking it would be easy to put one over on a child fresh out of the convent. Fat chance.

“OK. Look, I have to go. You understand that in the long term it isn’t up to me? I can let you stay on for the time being, but I’m only the caretaker. The farm is Sheila’s now – I don’t know what she’ll do with it. Did you ever meet her?”

Sharon shook her head and her hair fell loose on one side. She tucked it back, said nothing.

“I’ll talk to her. I think you’ll get on. But I’m not going to bankroll you the way Giles did, and this cash in hand stuff will have to stop. I’ll want a straightforward rent for the barn. My solicitor will draw up a short lease.”

She looked delighted.

“That’s great. Giles was our... angel, sort of. You know, like

COLD HILLSIDE

in the theatre? Got us started. But there's a fair amount of money through the business now, enough so that we can do the buying ourselves."

I grinned at her and reminded myself that this was the girl who made immediate cash offers. I had no doubt at all that a regular monthly overhead would turn out to be cheaper than Giles's share of the profits.

I should have known that these things come in threes. I had to wait until after the funeral for the third visitation. Sheila had packed her books and flown back to her ivory tower. I had work piling up in London. It was my last night on the farm when the doorbell went.

The man was standing in the shadow of the porch with the security lights in the yard flaring behind him and at first I could not make out his face. Then he moved his head and the lamp in the hall made two flat, bright disks of his glasses.

"Simon, isn't it? You probably don't remember me. We met at a wedding a few years ago. Sam Crawford."

Back in the kitchen he took possession of one of the arm-chairs, but to start with he sat on the edge of his seat. He placed his briefcase on the floor beside him, in line with the crack between two of the flagstones.

"I thought I should come down myself," he said. "Rather than writing or phoning. I was in business with your brother and... Well, we were all terribly shocked when we heard about the accident." He looked embarrassed rather than shocked, but then, as I was finding, people did. Some muttered platitudes, some said nothing at all. I did not know which I would have done myself, or which I preferred. I made an encouraging gesture with one hand.

"Yes. Well, I sell adventure holidays, I don't know whether I told you?"

"I think so. Didn't you have a deal with Polly's husband?"

MARTIN COOPER

“That’s right.” He settled further back in the armchair. “We used to camp on a patch of their land, down by the beach. Then when they left the country I came to a similar arrangement with Giles.”

“Ah.”

Crawford pulled a face. “OK, I admit it. That’s my main reason for coming. ‘Ah’ about sums it up. Sorry. But life really does go on. I’ve got bookings right through to next summer and I need to know whether or not I can honour them.”

“Sure, I understand. So... how did it go, then? What were these holidays all about?”

Crawford leaned over for his briefcase and rested it on his knees to snap the locks. He took out a couple of glossy brochures and handed one across to me.

“To start with, they’re not holidays. We get the occasional nutcase wanting to do a course for fun, but nearly all our customers are companies.”

“They’d have to be,” I said. I was looking at the back of the booklet, where there was an impressive list of fees.

Crawford shrugged. “You have to charge the sort of money corporate clients understand,” he said. “Too little and they don’t take you seriously. Some of them use the courses as team building exercises, others use them for staff evaluation, often it’s a bit of both. One firm even sends job applicants down for a couple of days as part of the interview process. I’m surprised they don’t run a mile – but presumably that’s the point.”

“And they have to live off the land?”

“They have minimum rations – no more than they can carry in their pockets. We put in an instructor, of course, and he or she trains the group in basic survival techniques. It’s standard army stuff, not rocket science. The instructor’s real job is to watch and listen and when it’s all over to provide the client with a report on each individual. Some companies like formal

COLD HILLSIDE

debriefing sessions with a presentation. We can set the group tasks and video its performance if that's what the client wants."

I turned over the pages of the brochure. It showed men and women, youngish on the whole, building shelters and tending fires. They looked grubby but good humoured. The weather seemed to be warm and dry.

"I'm still trying to get my head round the idea of living off the land in a corner of one of Giles's fields," I said.

"It's a bit more demanding than that."

"Why land your victims by sea?" The cover of the brochure featured a photograph taken along the length of a beach. The surf was up and a boat was riding it in. There were half a dozen people on board. The men were braced against the sides and the girls' hair was blowing in the wind.

"Presentation," Crawford said. "That's one of our big selling points. If we simply marched them down to the campsite it would be very tame. So we take them out at night from West Bay and spend an hour or so chugging round in circles in the Channel, then we land them in a Zodiac. That's a kind of inflatable..."

"I know what a Zodiac is."

"Right. This is the boat we keep at West Bay." He dug into his briefcase again and handed me a picture. It showed a squat, tug-like vessel, fifty or sixty feet long with a smoke stack and cabins amidships and a wheelhouse on top. "That's *The Hotspur*," he said. "Built in the 30s and used as a passenger ferry across Southampton Water until the late 70s. After that she worked in the Firth of Clyde. We bought her about five years ago."

"Do you know, I think I've been on her?" I said. "Long time ago in Southampton, when I was a kid. Wasn't there a pier at one end of the ferry, with a train on it?"

"No idea. I've never been there."

I experienced a flash of childhood, more than memory, gone

MARTIN COOPER

before I could fix it. Kneeling on a slatted bench which hurt my bare knees and leaning over a glossy black bulwark, greasy with salt, looking down at the green splash of the bow wave. Smell of brine and diesel. Everything huge. I must have been quite young. I could not see them, but I knew that Giles was there somewhere, and my mother.

“So what do you think?” Crawford prompted me.

“A winner, obviously, if you’ve got that many bookings. What was Giles’s cut?”

“Five per cent.”

“Really? What did he have to do to earn his money?”

“Not a thing. Keep the locals at bay. So can we carry on then? To be honest, we’d have trouble finding another location now – we were lucky when Polly and her husband emigrated.”

I was still thinking about my flicker of early experience. Not that unlikely, surely? Southampton was only in the next county, sixty miles away, if that. What more natural than a day out to see the ships?

“We might be able to go another two and a half per cent,” Crawford said, mistaking my distraction for a bargaining move.

“That sounds good to me, but I’d have to talk it over with Sheila. You know that Giles’s wife has inherited?”

“Not you then? I thought she was in the States or something.”

“She is. She’ll probably be coming back some time next year. In the mean time I’m keeping an eye on things.”

He left soon after that. When he had gone I opened a bottle of wine and sat for some time at the shadowed kitchen table thinking about day trips with a mother whose features I could barely recall.

COLD HILLSIDE

4

At the back of the church I heard shuffling and scraping, the congregation standing as the coffin was carried in. Then white blur of surplice and the black bulk of four undertaker's men swaying up the aisle, walking in step with an odd nautical gait.

I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.

And the rest of you can bugger off. Only four? There should be six, surely? You can't get the staff. Just don't drop it, that's all.

We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away.

And he takes the best and leaves us the dross. Hard to imagine anything inside the box. The sides are so hard and enclosing. The polish on the veneer deflects the imagination. It must be terrible to live in one of those countries where the dead are simply wrapped in a cloth, to see the shape of the head and the shoulders. How shabby black looks.

The coffin was lowered onto trestles and the four men executed a prim bow to the altar, all together as if operated by the same string. Then they spun on their heels and swayed back out of sight. Another coffin this afternoon, and another tomorrow and the same the day after, and in the evenings they would go home to their suppers and play with their children, carry them on the same shoulders. In the midst of death they were in life.

One by one Giles's friends stood out to share their memories of him. Stories of his generosity, his common sense, his jokes. I had decided not to say anything, if only because I didn't think I could get through it without embarrassing myself and everyone else. And what could I possibly have told them that they did not

MARTIN COOPER

already know? Better than I did, it seemed to me, as I stared at the polished wood and felt the tears drying on my chin.

Outside, the sun was shining. Sheila, Bridie and I followed the coffin as it rocked out of the porch and the rest of the congregation came blinking, a respectful distance behind us. We walked back away from the square, between hollies and lichen covered memorials, towards a newer section of the graveyard claimed from the fields behind the church. The stones were clean and straight, just a couple of rows of them so far. The grass had been given its last mowing of the year a few weeks earlier and grey lines of uncollected cuttings still lay there. Giles's grave would complete the second row. The mound of loose earth had been covered with a sheet of that green raffia matting that greengrocers use in their window displays. A light wind riffled the pages of the priest's prayer book and he held them flat with his free hand as he read.

Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up and is cut down, like a flower.

The sides of the hole were horribly neat and square as they lowered him in.

Afterwards I went round thanking people for coming. I had thanked an embarrassed cousin for the third time when Bridie slipped her hand into mine and walked me away. She stood with her arms round me under the trees until everyone had gone, my dark suit the shadow to her flame.

Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts.

I met her at Cropredy, where the afternoon audience covered the hillside overlooking the sound stage, a patchwork mass of groundsheets, flags and faces. Later there would be bright

COLD HILLSIDE

sweaters and anoraks because the night air could be chilly, even in August. Children exhausted by the jugglers and the bouncy castle would curl up in sleeping bags at their parents' feet. The twilight would thicken with the smell of hot dogs, spicy burgers and spilt bitter and steam would rise up between the lights as they came on in food stalls round the edge of the meadow. On a good year a gravid harvest moon used to rise from behind the fenced artists-only area at the bottom of the hill and the crowd used to push to the edge of the stage to be near the music.

That was not a good year, I remember. In fact, it pissed down.

Many of the youngsters did not seem to care. On the Saturday afternoon the rain was still warm and they splashed laughing through the mud, barefoot some of them, hair in rats' tails, clothes darkened and sodden. Older and drier heads had listened to the weather forecast and come with golfing umbrellas and Wellingtons. They had been to other festivals in other wet years and knew all about camping with running groundsheets and no change of socks. The crowd was thinner than usual and the field looked like a bed on a mushroom farm, with polythene benders sprouting on all sides. One after another the bands played and people came and went between field, campsite and Portaloo. The whole weekend you could hear their chatter mixing with a background thrum of generators.

With some time still to go before our set, we were lounging in one of the trailers provided for performers. Our drummer was fidgeting with his mobile phone and moving from seat to seat trying to get a decent signal. When it came to making the call his nerve always failed him so the rest of us were taking it in turns to speak to the maternity ward 30 miles away in Oxford. Labour was progressing normally, a voice assured me. Nothing to worry about, but it could be a while yet.

Just time for something to eat, I thought. I poked through the

MARTIN COOPER

pile of rubber boots by the door, but one of the crew had taken mine so I slipped on a pair at random and picked up the largest umbrella I could find. Outside there were well-churned tracks between trailers. The organisers had tried to prevent a mud bath by pouring truck loads of wood chippings along the walkways. At the security gate into the main arena they had laid down duck boards which flexed as I walked across them so that water welled up between the slats with each step. It was not long before I became aware that the boots I had chosen were a size too large for me.

I limped up the hill, keeping to the side of the field where there was an open broadwalk in front of the concession holders' trailers. Wood chippings had been liberally shovelled out here too, and it was crowding umbrellas rather than mud that made the going difficult. Every few steps I had to lower my own and duck under an awning to let someone by. I spent ten minutes in a marquee full of CD stalls, and as usual flipped through the racks looking for my own name. One compilation album, with the credit in print so small I could hardly read it. Oh well. Better than a poke in the eye.

A Japanese meal, eaten out of a polystyrene tray with a white plastic fork, then I moved further up the hill to a truck where they served better coffee. A chilly runnel of water shot down my neck. Even under the awnings there were drips everywhere. A hat, I decided. Never mind about looking silly. Everybody looked ridiculous in that sort of weather, no harm in joining them if it meant a dry shirt.

A few yards away half a dozen traders shared a large tent: a couple of jewellery makers with trays of twining Celtic ear rings in silver and copper; some racks of Indian dresses, purple and rust-red cotton with pieces of polished metal stitched into the borders; hand-made shoes, all a bit lumpy looking, but brilliantly coloured. At the far end a collection of hats covered a trestle

COLD HILLSIDE

table and climbed partway up the pole supporting the canvas overhead. Some of them were practical countryside headgear, the sort of thing you could buy anywhere, but they were fun hats mostly, hand-made top-heavy felt creations shaped like stuffed animals. Nobody seemed to be in charge so I picked up a fool's cap and bells and squinted at myself in a mirror attached to the tent pole. *How now, nunckle? If thou wert my fool, I'd have thee beaten for being old before thy time.*

"It doesn't suit you." In the mirror I saw green eyes level with my shoulder, red hair tucked up into a floppy tam o'shanter of blue and gold velvet patches, part Hans Holbein the younger, part Salvador Dali.

"Anyway, the bells will go rusty. You need something more practical this weather. Try that." She handed me a broad-brimmed thing commercially produced out of waxed canvas. I looked at the maker's name and at the price tag.

"More practical, and more expensive," I said.

"Well, obviously. I'm supposed to be selling the wretched things, after all."

"Not your stall, then?"

"My sister's. She'll be back in a minute. She ate something that disagreed with her. It's guaranteed waterproof. Put your head outside and try it."

I followed her over to the tent entrance. Sure enough the rain gathered into beads which ran off the brim's slick waxed surface. And her grin was irresistible.

"OK, I'll take it." I passed over several notes and received a couple of coins in return. She stuffed the notes into her pocket.

"Come on," she said. "We'll take it for a test drive."

"What about the stall?"

"Oh, the others will keep an eye on it."

Not much of a test in the end, because she took my arm and we both ducked our hats under the umbrella. We wound our

MARTIN COOPER

way gradually up the hill exchanging basic information, as you do on these occasions. Her name was Bridie.

But festival promoters wait for no man.

“Look, I’ve got to go. Um... later on – a drink or something?”

“I’d like that. Go on, I’ll find you.” She patted my arm and slipped off among the milling umbrellas, like a minnow through the weeds.

I made it back to the trailer with twenty minutes to spare. I need not have hurried. In a warm, dry ward on the other side of the county the baby had arrived, pink and wrinkled “like a wee prune”, according to its exhausted mother, who had been allowed a few words on the phone. The welcome party carried us all out through the rain and onto the stage on a tide of goodwill, energy and whisky that infected the damp audience from the first chord.

I caught sight of Bridie again while we were playing, right at the front of the crowd. She had exchanged the many-coloured hat for a long, green slicker with a hood but her face was turned up into the rain as she listened and her cheeks were wet. She was not bouncing up and down like some of the others. Serious eyes moved from one instrument to the next and when I felt them on me I lost it for a second and almost fumbled an over-elaborate riff. Somehow my fingers kept moving through the cold thump of fear in my belly and the notes sorted themselves out, but it was a while before I looked in her direction again. When I did she was watching the drummer, who was high on fatherhood.

At the end of the set the people whistled and shouted as we trooped off. Sweating and laughing we gathered in the shadows round a girl in a *Jethro Tull* T-shirt. She wore lightweight headphones connected to a box on her belt and frowned at a wasp buzz in her ear.

COLD HILLSIDE

“Mike says we’ve got a bit of slack – another 10 minutes if you want it.”

“Tell them about the baby,” someone called out.

“Why not?” The drummer cocked his head and listened to the audience, who were still clapping. “Give them a little bit longer...” Then: “OK. Let’s do it.”

Back on stage with the crowd cheering I watched him handle the microphone, thanking everyone for braving the weather, passing on the news about the baby (louder cheers).

“And finally, thanks from all of us to Simon Coltraine on fiddle, who stepped in at very short notice. Simon.”

I tore off a double-stopped ripple of notes and bared my teeth at the hillside. Then I looked down at the front row, but Bridie was nowhere to be seen.

Afterwards the celebrations continued back in the trailer and the overcast afternoon lowered into premature evening. People stopped by with their congratulations and a good many of them stayed on to steam up the windows and track the floor with mud. Thinking of the drive to the hotel, I switched to orange juice and after a while found my own boots, picked up the silly hat and went outside.

It had stopped raining, but everything was still sodden. Lights were being switched on a couple of hours earlier than usual and some of the smaller traders were packing up. The food stalls were selling briskly, though, most of them with good-humoured queues of customers, perspiring staff handing out paper bags and plates as fast as they could fill them. The crowd was getting denser, with people drifting in from campsite and car park to mark out their places on the wet grass for the last set.

I wandered up the hill again and found the hats being packed into boxes. A large woman in an ankle-length skirt with a muddy hem looked at me blankly when I asked how she was feeling.

“Sorry, I thought you must be Bridie’s sister. Is she about?”

MARTIN COOPER

“Who?”

“Bridie...? Er... Red hair...? She was wearing a green slicker a while ago, but it’s stopped raining now...”

“Sorry, doesn’t ring any bells. Sure you’ve got the right tent?”

“Um... Actually, come to think of it...”

I backed off, mumbling apologies, and she went back to her packing, smiling and shaking her head.

I stood outside for a couple of minutes, scanning the crowd, then moved away. The woman might come out and I did not want her asking me why exactly I expected a 20-year-old redhead to be running her stall. Or why I was wearing a hat she had not sold to me.

Ought I to give it back? I imagined her sitting at home, stitching away. None of the traders had had a good weekend, one sale might make a difference. On the other hand the hats were probably made in China at a factory price of a few pence each and I had paid for mine, even if the money had gone into Bridie’s pocket. A neat little scam. Well... a rather mean petty theft, though executed with impressive *sang froid*, if that made any difference. But now Bridie had become one of the anonymous crowd again and all I had to show for the encounter was a hot hat. In the end, I kept it. *Caveat venditor*.

The last encore finished shortly after midnight. The hillside was lit up by the white glare of floodlights. Pale faces turned and dipped seeking out belongings, then swirled slowly towards the exits like dust motes in a jar. I said my farewells, refused a final dram and carried my fiddle case out to the car park.

As usual it took half an hour to get to the gate of the field. Cars bumped and swayed over wet grass and cow pats, and marshals in reflective coats cursed as drivers spun their wheels in the exits, digging muddy ruts even deeper. Lights flared on portable gantries at key points but for the most part the unfamiliar countryside darkness was lit by crawling, bobbing

COLD HILLSIDE

headlights which flashed in my eyes as they swung past.

Out in the lane things were not much better. Traffic crept in single file to the nearest main road, five miles away. People laden with bags and groundsheets were walking along both verges towards the more remote campsites, occasionally spilling into the path of the vehicles. At the bottom of the hill, by a small bridge, a caterer's van was struggling against the flow and I pulled into a gateway to let it pass.

Somebody tapped on the passenger window. I leaned over to look, then opened the door and Bridie tossed her rucksack onto the back seat. She may have seen the hat lying there.

"Told you I'd find you," was all she said.

Neither of us spoke much on the drive back to Oxford. It started raining again. The windscreen wipers thumped backwards and forwards and now and then oncoming headlights flicked across her face, scattered and blurred by raindrops on the glass. She fiddled with the radio but found nothing to her liking.

"Tapes in the glove compartment." About my only words the entire journey.

She sorted through them, stacking them in small piles on the drop-down shelf and leaning forwards against the seat belt to peer at one or two of the inserts by the dim light from inside. When she clicked a cassette into the player it turned out to be Billie Holiday. We entered the city to the weary fatalism of *God Bless the Child*.

At the hotel she made straight for the bathroom.

"Shower," she said. "Haven't had a shower for two days."

I sat on the bed and listened to her through the half-open bathroom door. I could hear her bare feet on the tiles, little humming noises as she rummaged among the complimentary soaps and shampoos, then a squeak when the water came out too cold. After a while she emerged wrapped in a white bath towel, with another turbaned round her head. She had freckles

MARTIN COOPER

on her shoulders. She leaned, arms folded, against the door jamb and looked at me.

“I sing, you know.”

Ab well, I thought. She nodded.

“There you are, you see. I couldn’t make up my mind whether it would be better to tell you or not. Tell you, and I’m a slut on the make. Not, and I’m just a slut. But in the end I couldn’t not, because it’s important.”

“There’s nothing to be made out of me. I’m a fiddle player.”

“When you start your own band you’ll need a singer. That’s what you want, isn’t it? I saw the way you watched the guy with the mike.”

Yes it is, I thought. *And it’s time too*. I had been a hanger on long enough. I wanted to be the one that chose the songs, made the bookings. The one with the microphone.

“Let’s hear you now then. Don’t wake up the neighbours.”

So she sat on the end of the bed, straight-backed with her hands in her lap like a schoolgirl doing her party piece, and sang softly, wistfully, in a voice that stopped my heart.

What is love? 'Tis not hereafter...

Later she said: “I’d still be here, you know, even if I had a voice like a frog. But I haven’t. I can’t help it.”

6

In some pubs, when you know them well, you can tell the time by the volume of talk. The day of the week, too.

You push open the door and the noise drops on you like a blanket. A steady walking bass of voices overlaid by lighter chatter and an occasional shriek from the harpy with scarlet nails

COLD HILLSIDE

in the corner. Orders at the bar. *Make that two, will you?* A sudden chorused shout of laughter as a table reaches the punch line. Underneath it all the chink of glasses and the groan of pump handles and the rattle of the till. *Do you want ice?* No canned music, because the landlord has conservative tastes. Live R&B on Fridays because his wife likes a bit of life.

I hold the door for Bridie, and the talk says: “Ten o’clock, Wednesday. October, probably.”

Len heads for the bar while Bridie and I clear a litter of crisp packets from a table in a corner. Steve has slouched off on his own to nurse his resentment and Ian has gone home to adjust something or other.

“So what was this policeman after?” Bridie asks, removing a couple of empty bottles.

“I’ve no idea. Giles had a lot to drink on the night of the accident, apparently. No surprises there. But only shortly before the crash. If it made any sense I’d say Randall thought something else might have caused it.”

“Such as...?”

“Beats me. He wanted to know why Giles phoned me at Salisbury. Went on about it quite a bit, in fact.”

If Bridie has any ideas she is not sharing them. She stares past me at Len, who is edging towards us carrying three pints of beer braced together between long fingers. He sets them down, distributes them, then starts taking packets of crisps from his jacket pockets.

“There you go. Ready salted... Cheese and onion... Prawn cocktail flavour? I don’t remember asking for those.”

“I’ll have them.” I pick up the packet and tug it open. Len takes a long pull on his beer, then sighs.

“You know, we’ve got to get another bass player. The keyboard can do a lot, but it hasn’t got the attack of a proper bass. Extra voice wouldn’t do any harm, either.”

MARTIN COOPER

“I thought Ian was filling the gap rather well,” I say.

“He is. I’m not saying otherwise. But the sound has got to be reasonably consistent. Just now, anyone who buys the last CD during the interval is going to get it home and find that it isn’t what they heard at the gig.”

“Par for the course, then.” Bridie chips in.

“Ho, ho. OK, we’ve always managed to add something fresh. But this is a little bit too radical, is all I’m saying. The people on the mailing list will be expecting the core sound to be the one we started with: not keyboard, not even, I’m sorry to say, the extraordinarily versatile rhythm section. It’s voice, fiddle and bass.”

“No bass in *Cold Hillside*,” says Bridie. “We get requests for that all the time.”

“That was a one-off. We’ve never managed to match it.”

Bridie says nothing, buries her nose in her glass.

“Well, I’m looking round,” I say.

And I am, but our kind of music is bread and butter stuff. Often no butter. Certainly no chart toppers. This has been a familiar argument over the past few weeks, ever since our bass player heard a regular salary calling and left to train as a teacher.

Just before closing, and we’re out on the pavement. There is a hint of fog around the yellow street lights and a sheen of moisture over the parked cars. I button my coat. Len pats me on the back, gives Bridie a wave and ambles off. Behind us the doors of the pub thump to and fro as people make their way home. Someone is finishing a story, someone else calls goodbye. An engine starts.

“How are you feeling?” Bridie asks.

“Me? Fine.”

“Come on, you know what I mean. Are you sleeping properly? You look tired.”

“Oh well, dragging up and down on the train... You only

COLD HILLSIDE

had to do it once, for the funeral, but what with that bloody policeman...”

She touches my cheek. “Do you want me to come back to your place tonight?”

“That’s sweet of you, Bridie, but probably not a good idea. Too many sleeping tigers.”

“If you’re sure.” She smiles and kisses me quickly before I can change my mind. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

I watch her cross to her car and wait until it has started. I still find things of hers round the flat sometimes. Bus ticket in a book, hair band at the back of a drawer. There are a couple of her pictures on the wall, waiting for her to collect them. At least she has nowhere better to hang them.

7

After a restless night in a lonely bed I make coffee, shove bread in the toaster. On the radio the commentators are still busy pointing fingers. Does Britain really have its own home-grown terrorist cells or are they receiving direction and training from overseas? If there are advisers, why do the intelligence services not know about them? I am almost out of milk.

I think about the jobs to be done. A couple of hours practice, once the man downstairs has gone to work – the breaks in Bridie’s new song could do with a bit of attention. Think about accommodation for the spring tour. Bristol is close enough to drive back, surely? Exeter possibly not, but Len has friends there. If we’re staying overnight I could try to find another venue nearby. Send out some demo CDs. Check whether the photographer has put her prices up. She did a good job last time, but there might be somebody cheaper. Ask Bridie if she knows anyone. Talk to the bank. Again.

MARTIN COOPER

But first phone Matt.

A brisk female puts me on hold for a minute or so, with a beep every few seconds to remind me how long I have been waiting. Then Matt's voice:

"Simon. Sorry to keep you hanging on."

"At least there was no muzak."

"Ah, we're having a bit of a debate about that. One of the senior partners wants Mozart and another wants Jelly Roll Morton. I tell them that the sound quality won't do justice to either, but I don't know how much longer I can hold them off."

"The firm moves with the times, I see."

"Indeed. And the clerks get an extra bucket of coals at Christmas. I imagine you're calling about that policeman? Have you had your meeting?"

I give him a brief resume of the encounter with Randall. Silence at the other end of the line.

"Matt? You still there?"

"Yes. Sorry. Simon, I don't much like the sound of this. You were absolutely right to wonder about it being outdoors. Very odd. In fact I'm surprised he saw you at all. I mean, we're talking about a routine road traffic accident. Sorry, not routine to you, I know, and not to me either, but from their point of view... single vehicle, no third party injuries, no big deal. If they had wanted to talk to you they would have invited you down to the nick. He was the one that wanted to meet, you said?"

"Yes. I rang them a couple of times to see if they had anything new. Got nowhere at all. I don't even know who I spoke to – some junior constable. I'd about given up when he called me."

"And he called himself, personally? No sergeant doing the legwork?"

"Um... yes. Yes, he did."

"Did he actually say he'd checked your mobile phone records?"

COLD HILLSIDE

I think back. As usual, when I try to pin down the words spoken they slip away.

“As far as I remember, I brought it up. He wanted to know where I was when Giles rang me. I made some smart comment about looking up the records and he said he already had.”

“Never make jokes to policemen. They don’t understand. Simon, you haven’t been up to anything I should know about, have you? Gun running?”

“Nah. No profit in guns nowadays, everybody’s got one. I’m a musician.”

“Hm. Tracing phone calls is serious stuff, you see. No police force in the country is going to go to that trouble on account of a road accident.”

“Did you get a chance to ask around?”

“Yes. He isn’t local. Seems to be attached to some sort of regional group. No idea which – they invent a new one every other week. The people I spoke to were a bit vague. He has a desk in Dorchester, but I got the impression that he isn’t liked. Not much help. I’ll keep my ears open, but in the meantime, if he wants to see you again I should be with you. Seriously.”

Personally I think this is over the top, but I make acquiescent noises.

“Oh, by the way,” Matt adds. “Since you’re there, I’ve got some stuff about the farm for you to sign. One of the neighbours has been leasing a couple of the fields and it’s up for renewal. Did Sheila say what she wanted to do about that?”

“Not specifically. General instructions to carry on as before.”

“OK, I’ll put the paperwork in the post. Did you know you’re mentioned in the will?”

“Really? I thought Sheila got everything.”

“Almost everything. Giles asked me to add a few lines a couple of months ago. I’ll be writing to you, but the gist of it is that he left you his violins. What are you laughing at?”

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What reviewers had to say about *Cold Hillside*:

Sometimes I'll read a book and think, "I wish I could write that well." Cold Hillside is one of those books... Mr. Cooper likes to skip around in time and tense, a juggler tossing up a new ball without fanfare, until you realize he's got eight or ten in the air, and all you can do is applaud.

Good Book Alert

A successful merger of crime novel and literary style.

Booked Up

Cold Hillside is the kind of book that demonstrates just why self publishing is beginning to really take off in the current publishing climate. With the bigger publishing houses currently focussing on genres and ideas that are proven best-sellers (the Dan Brown-style thriller, the supernatural teen romance), there is little room for books that deviate from the fashions of the moment. Self publishing allows books like Cold Hillside, which don't fit so easily into genres and sales patterns, to find a readership. And this book deserves a readership.

Agrippina Legit