

Country Girl

GROWING UP ON A COMMUNE IN THE EIGHTIES MIGHT SEEM IDYLIC, BUT FOR A TEENAGER FROM LONDON LIVING ON A DIET OF WEEDS, IT FELT LESS TOM 'N' BARBARA AND MORE LIKE PURGATORY.

WORDS: JEMMA KENNEDY

When I was a child, grownups talked about The Countryside as if it was a sixth continent. Listening to my father describe his boyhood trips to Devon, you would have thought they were excursions into Narnia – a place of adventure, freedom, and exoticism, far flung from the dull suburban landscape of post-war London. The blissful summer holidays he had spent in an aunt's cottage no doubt sowed the seed of a desire to move to the country in later life, something that would have profound effects on my own childhood. I was a child of the seventies, and thus became part of a little documented but widespread British social migration during that decade, in which scores of middle class radicals and ex-hippies moved west from the cities in which the alternative revolution had started, and settled in Wales and its border counties. A decade of political and sexual experimental living had reduced their revolutionary zeal to a series of warring ideological factions, and now they wanted to swap the rat race for grass, blue skies, fecundity and English rural communities living simple, honest lives. That was the theory, anyway.

G, my dad, was one of these pioneers. His earlier attempts at ruralism had failed spectacularly. When we were very young, he and my mother had joined a commune in southern Scotland, a derelict sixty-roomed Edwardian mansion, co-bought by five couples with ideals beyond their means. Cue the end of my parents' relationship. After this G set up in a London house with his girlfriend, her husband and their kids (separate bedrooms and shared privileges for all). My memories of this time are a sensory landscape of stale incense, slamming doors, stifled weeping and 'Abbey Road'. It was clearly time to call their attempts at radical co-operative living a day.

So, equipped with little more than a clapped-out London cab filled with building tools and a series of books on organic vegetable cultivation, G and his girlfriend bought a crumbling part-Tudor ruin in a tiny town in Shropshire Marches to pursue their dreams of Blakeian utopia. Self-sufficiency was the byword of that time. If you couldn't grow it, build it, weave it, brew it or biodegrade it by yourself, it wasn't worth having. R.D. Laing and Marx were their intellectual mentors. If you were unhappy, you discussed your feelings in a group meeting or wrote a song about it. The men had beards, long hair and dungarees, the women wore cheesecloth, shawls and clogs. This look owed as much to romantic ideals of English pastoralism as it did to Steeleye Span album covers. They were Luddites, anarchists and vegetarians. The Countryside was their republic.

In contrast, the indigenous country folk who comprised their new neighbours wore tight denim, called a spade a spade and a hippie a fuckin' prat. They could hardly be blamed for being bewildered by this influx of hirsute southerners with Oxbridge accents, whose women refused to shave but objected to having body parts compared to beavers. The end result was an almost total segregation between the locals and the new community of artists, anarchists and peaceniks (or Freaks, as they were known) as rigid as that to be found in any class-based industrial society. The locals came from Conservative voting nuclear families. The Freaks were social radicals, sexually liberated, and utterly dedicated to the idea of participating in the customs of country life. My father joined the Morris dancing team. The locals played darts. The newsagent did a roaring trade in Mails and Mirrors, while the Freaks had to fight over the daily allocation of Guardians. The farmers and tradesmen got shitfaced on Midori cocktails in the Six Bells, the Freaks drank the local ale in the Tunns and ran alternative film nights in the upstairs room (*The Seventh Seal*, *Dr. Strangelove*, educational films about Communist Russia – I kid you not). The locals wisely eschewed these for the Legion Hall disco, where I saw my first proper fist fight played out by two farm hands against a soundtrack of The Moody

Blues. The Freaks injected the quiet landscape with anti-nuke banners, murals and rainbow knits, while reviving an interest in patchwork that the locals had probably only just seen off in favour of sta-press. Oddly, they didn't seem grateful.

It was to this dramatic rural battleground that my sister, brother and I were dispatched every school holiday over a period of six or seven years. Gone was the soot and the sexual politics of Tufnell Park. 'Abbey Road' was replaced by 'Rumours' and the sound of the cement mixer. The incense gave way to the smell of paint, dust and new bread. Doors still slammed but the sulking went on in the vegetable garden. My memories have since condensed into a single endless summer haunted by the echo of empty cobblestones and whitewashed walls baked by the sun. When I look back now I appreciate the magic of the place, but at the time, once the initial interest in G's new home had worn off, we merely endured it. The countryside is a perfect host to childhood nostalgia and adult romanticism, but for a set of early 80's pre-pubescent it was purgatory. We did not want to sit in the back room of a pub and listen to someone play the dulcimer. We did not want to eat weeds. We did not want to take part in the local fete ('Guess The Weight of the Sheep', a tombola with Co-op prizes, home-made bara brith.)

We did not want to spend our Saturday nights learning 'Strip the Willow' to the accompaniment of the local ceilidh band. We wanted artificial excitement – television, flashing lights, food that was shrink-wrapped, not pulled from the earth and hosed down in the back yard.

Our problem was the eternal problem of the teenager – the countryside was boring. There was nothing to do that we considered a worthwhile pursuit, which baffled G. 'What do you mean, nothing to do? There's acres of countryside out there to explore! Precisely. Who wanted to ruin their espadrilles traipsing through dried cowpats? As G's days were spent trying to stop the house from falling down around us, we were forced to make our own entertainment.

There were a number of splendid rural eccentrics to study, including Dummy Lock, the congenital deaf-mute from a local gypsy family, who

was now in his seventies, still slept under his caravan, howled instead of talking, and had whiskers that grew right across his face. There was Rosie, who, like her literary counterpart, drank cider, was big, busty, and grew up to be a barmaid, but not before terrorising the three of us from the top of the slide in the local playground, which was the town's cultural throne.

Once we were older, high points of our visits included the local disco, where our knowledge of current dance-steps awarded us a temporary social status, and the proliferation of empty fields in which to practise drinking, smoking, and eating sweets (sugar was considered ideologically unsound in G's house). There was also the day we found a tiny dead rodent in the lane and buried it in the village churchyard beneath a roof slate, on which we scratched the immortal epitaph, Here Lies the Shrew That Nobody Knew. Not even Thomas Hardy could surpass such lyricism.

Generally, however, it was tough going.

My older sister wanted to smoke John Player Specials, colour her hair with food-dye and talk about life, men and whether or not Spear of Destiny would reform. My younger brother wanted to play war, in a town full of committed pacifists whose small children knew all the yoga positions but had never played Space Invaders. I seem to remember spending a lot of time writing wistful notes to myself and hiding them in the stump of a giant fallen oak. The three of us were lost in the countryside, refugees from another world where you were allowed to stay in your bedroom all day and not forced to go outside exploring. Just because we were surrounded by fields and trees didn't mean they were compulsory. The Freaks' deification of Nature, to me, bordered on the Fascistic.

Of course now I am arguably almost a grown-up myself, I feel a passion for this distant golden era of my childhood, which, like most good things, came to a messy end. G and the girlfriend split up, the house was sold, the CND group fell out, the locals got cable TV and the antique dealers began their slow invasion. Whenever I go back now, I feel that longing for the past – perhaps the same kind of nostalgia that prompted G to move there in the seventies. I think we grow to cherish the countryside as adults because the rural landscape is so much slower to change – it doesn't let us down. We return over the years and find the view unaltered, and we imprint it with memories, both good and bad. And so, somehow, it becomes a shrine to our past.

Eventually I have come to realise that The Countryside is a concept invented by human beings against which we measure our own mortality. By staying constant and true, it reminds us how much we have changed ourselves. Of course we want to believe it encapsulates all that is peaceful, idyllic and innocent about the world, even though common sense tells us otherwise – because we remember being like that too, once upon a time. Perhaps, in a burst of pre-adult prescience, this is why I buried my own notes to my childish self – I wanted a record of who I was, knowing that I wouldn't always be the same. I've never found the tree stump since, although I've searched high and low. Perhaps it's just as well. Some illusions should be left as they are.

OUR NEW
NEIGHBOURS WORE
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CALLED A SPADE A
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A FUCKIN' PRAT

