

AFTER GCSEs, Mum said I had to get a job, so I started working in the cafe at the caravan site in Nanpean.¹ It was a shitty job for five quid an hour but at least I didn't have to pretend to be polite to the customers: I was stuck in the kitchen all day doing the washing up. There was a weird smell and they had Pirate FM² on all day – I swear I memorised the entire lyrics of Mr Blue Sky and Radio Ga Ga that summer – but like I said, better that than having to take the food out. The guests were all from up-country³ – emmets,⁴ Dad would call them – and they weren't even the respectable sort, the ones who could afford to stay in the nice places on the coast, so they all came to Nanpean and pretended this was the Cornish seaside holiday of a lifetime when they were really just stuck in their caravans in the rain for two weeks.

We never knew how many people were going to come into the cafe. If it was good weather we'd barely get anyone and there wasn't much point in me being there, they could wash the plates easily enough without me. When it rained it was hell up.⁵ A couple of times we got entire coachloads of German

¹ a small village in inland mid-Cornwall (which as far as I'm aware has no caravan site)

² local commercial music station

³ past Cornwall's border

⁴ slightly derogatory word for tourists, literally meaning "ants"

⁵ chaos

tourists – I think they got lost looking for Truro⁶ – and we were flat out all day. But it was always sort of unpredictable. On the quieter days, they used to send me down to the shop in Nanpean village to stock up on supplies: I had to cycle back a couple of times with a six-pint bottle of milk hanging off each handlebar.

On one of those quiet days I was sent off to get milk – not twelve pints of it this time, thankfully – and eggs, but they hadn't had any of those in yet. "There's a farm over Trevarren way sells eggs sometimes, my lovely,"⁷ said the old boy⁸ who ran the shop, "have ee⁹ tried there?" I tried ringing Sharon back at the cafe to see if she wanted me to make the extra trip but of course either one or both of us had no signal. She used to get teasy as an adder¹⁰ when we ran out of things, so I thought it was probably worth going.

The old boy gave me some vague directions to the farm. Trevarren wasn't too far from one of the clay pits,¹¹ and my bike tyres were getting the white dust all over them, and the mizzle¹² had set in since I left; it was getting humid as hell, so

⁶Cornwall's most major settlement

⁷generic term of endearment, now more common than the stereotypical "my lover"

⁸old man; "boy" is used for all ages

⁹"you" in Cornish dialect

¹⁰very irritable

¹¹China clay quarries, common in mid-Cornwall

¹²light rain; considered part of Cornish dialect although it occurs across

I took my jacket off and tied it around my waist. I thought I knew the way, but it was some foggy, like I was out on the moors or something, and it turned out the farm was harder to find than I expected. After a while I saw a light in the distance somewhere and I thought that might be the place I was heading for; and if it wasn't, I'd be able to ask whoever was there where I could find it.

I cycled on towards the light. It was lower to the ground than I expected: maybe a headlight on a car or tractor or something. I got close enough to nearly make out what it was coming from, when I hit my front wheel on something and went over.

It wasn't too disastrous. I didn't flip right over the handlebars or anything – I always used to imagine that happening – the bike just kind of jolted away from underneath me, and I grazed my hands a bit on the ground but it wasn't too bad. My jacket came untied from around my waist, and the bottle of milk I'd got from the shop got a hole in it and started leaking all over the inside of the jacket, but that was the worst of it.

When I looked up, though, I thought I'd lost it. There were about a dozen tiny people all standing there looking at me. I've tried describing what they looked like loads of times, and never quite hit on it, but here goes: they were about a metre high, but not kids – they were all wrinkled, like old people. They had

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long, straggly hair and they were dressed all in rags, but the strangest bit about them was their faces: wide, with big round eyes, really bushy eyebrows, long noses that made me think of dogs. Their mouths were enormous, and they had these little spiky teeth, top and bottom. Oh, and sort of webbed feet, as I remember it. I'm sure nobody would ever believe it, but that's what I saw.

Anyway, it sounded like they were trying to talk to me, although I couldn't make head or tail of what they were saying; it wasn't English, that's for sure. In the end the one who I guess was in charge came right up to me and said "Here, you'm some ansum cheel!¹³ No piggy widden,¹⁴ are ee?" He had a hell of an accent, like my granda.

The rest of them were crawling all around me by this point – a few of them had got hold of my jacket and were trying to lick the spilt milk off it. *Deus genen-nei*,¹⁵ they were saying, over and over again like it was some sort of hymn: it was pretty entrancing, in a weird way. I was sure they were no good – I mean, they looked pretty horrific, and supernatural creatures usually make their intentions clear in their appearance, right – but I suppose I felt like I was compelled to do what they wanted. Looking back, I can see

¹³you're a fine child; "ansum" is used liberally to mean something is good

¹⁴runt of the litter; from *wydn*, meaning "white" in the Cornish language

¹⁵"come with us" in the Cornish language; pronounced like "dees [rhymes with fleece] genna nigh"

now: my mind wasn't my own. I couldn't understand what they were saying, but I knew they wanted me to go with them, and I was totally willing to do it, too.

There was one thing, though: the bleddy jacket. See, I got that thing from Seasalt,¹⁶ and it was always a big joke among my mates because Seasalt is the kind of place that your mum would shop at, your gran even, and this jacket cost me fifty quid and it wasn't like anything else I wore at all but I liked the colours. (I never told them I'd bought it in the Fowey¹⁷ branch, not even the Truro one; they'd have taken the piss out of me for years.) So even though I was – well, piskey-led,¹⁸ the saying is, and I can see why – I was fixated enough on that jacket to grab it off the ground before following them, and I was going to put it on because it was absolutely henting down¹⁹ by that point, but the inside of it was all milky, so I somehow had the bright idea of turning the thing inside out so the milk wouldn't get on the rest of my clothes. So I pulled out the sleeves and put it on so the fleecy bit was facing outwards, and then I looked up, ready to follow the little people, and then – they were just gone. Vanished, all of them. And that was when I realised it probably wouldn't have been the best idea to follow

¹⁶overpriced clothing shop for middle-aged women that draws on a sort of gentrified surf culture

¹⁷town in east Cornwall, stereotypically inhabited by rich people

¹⁸said of lost travellers; we say “piskey” in Cornwall rather than “pixie”

¹⁹raining very hard

them to wherever the hell they were trying to lead me. But as I said, it was like a strange compulsion: like magic, I'd say, if this wasn't the twenty-first century. Because who believes in magic in this day and age, when we've got smartphones and wifi and blockchain and whatever else? Although there's still never any signal in Nanpean, to be fair.

This was a few years back now, mind. There were always a few bizarre things going on back home, mostly stories your mate told you that never seemed like they could be true, but none of my friends ever had anything *this* weird happen to them. After I moved up-country for uni a couple of years later, I never heard about anything like it ever again.