

Day one - darkness from light

I disembarked at Epping, last stop on the red line and final watering hole on the edgelands of London. Finding the fabled beginning of my footpath proved extremely difficult. After half an hour wandering up and down lonely cul-de-sacs, I started as I meant to continue, leaning on the kindness of strangers. A toothless sage with a Jack Russell spun me three times, like a virtual Dorothy, and Lo! there before me was the sign, albeit obscured by a wall of nettles and the back of someone's trampoline. Ten yards down the path and I had jettisoned suburban sprawl for fields of cowslips and blooming hedgerows. The sun was shining, my ladies' *Supalite* boots were performing seamlessly, and the sounds of London were rapidly receding behind me. I may have indulged in a spot of skipping, a pursuit too long monopolized by schoolgirls.

With four days of soulful striding before me what was going to occupy my thoughts? Lonely hikes are meant to inspire life-changing revelations. As you tramp along the big issues float into your wandering mind and the cosmos becomes clear. Or so the theory goes. In reality, very few epiphanies overtook me on the Essex byways. In place of pondering my stalled career, empty love life or the critical state of world hunger, I found myself returning to whether or not David Bowie really slept with Mick Jagger in 1984. Often I thought of nothing at all - a brain in limbo, content to listen to the fauna, flora and passing motorbikes.

After a couple of miles in the Epping bush I began to get the doubly unsettling impression that, rather than being followed, I was unwittingly following someone else - someone increasingly naked. Every mile down the trail I would come across a discarded item of clothing - a sock on a gatepost, a jumper under a bridge, a pair of patent boxers floating in a puddle. Not only was I walking in the wake of a rogue stripper but they seemed to be moving exceptionally fast. At every bend in the road I expected to see this free spirit, shedding their final strips of modesty and baring buttocks windward. By journey's end I had passed a wardrobe's worth of kit.

Strippers aside, my first day's escape was blighted by an A to Z of killer canines. Over those first tentative miles I saw more 'beware of the dog' signs than way markers and on every garden fence and wicker wall, a fanged cartoon glared at my passing boots. At the same time, I was discovering an increasingly worrying collection of lost dog appeals. Normally these posters find their heartland in W1, with eulogies to lost 'Fifis' and 'Snowballs', but here in Essex a pack of 'Bruisers', 'Nutters' and 'Flearoys' seemed to have broken free. When the sound of barking in suburbia rose to fever pitch I drifted into vicious cycles of daydream fantasy. Panting Alsatians chased me down twisting lanes, rabies-ridden eyes fixed on my crotch. The shadows of Rottweilers and Dobbermans darkened sunny street corners. I escaped injury throughout my travels, but the value of a sound walking stick cannot be overstated.

As the day progressed my path veered away from scattered hamlets and began to bisect cinematic crop fields, waving fronds all pointing eastward. Lost in these dense jungles of spring germination I became increasingly disorientated and, at some point, realised I had been hacking through the same head high rapeseed for over an hour.

The sure footing of the byway was a distant memory and every horizon was a uniform yellow. Plant oils had dyed my skin a Simpson hue and my 99p compass seemed to be stuck on terminal north. Suddenly, off to my right in the very heart of the towering crop, a great scything channel began to emerge. Stalks thrashed right and left as something or someone stampeded toward me. Instinctively I adopted a defensive squat, half an inch of swiss army steel in one hand, half a chocolate bar in the other. What kind of primordial beast would emerge from the labyrinth? More visions of mutant dogs began flickering across my sun-stroked mind as the unknown terror approached. Then, with a mighty crackling, the beast emerged, every bit as horrifying as I had imagined.

Sitting astride a battery-powered buggy rode a gigantic specimen of womankind, a brown-stocking, floral-print, purple-rinse granny - a bat out of nonagenarian hell. Gobsmacked, I watched this apparition disappear with a whirr into the yellow yonder. Nervously stepping into its 10mph wake, I decided to follow this mobile semaphore wherever it might lead, following the logic that flying grannies must land somewhere. My luck was in. Five minutes later I found myself on the edge of the eternal rape and next to a Sainsbury's superstore.

Having stocked up on key provisions (scotch egg, bagel, Mr. Kipling) I stopped for lunch in the village of Good Easter. With such a name the tired hiker might be forgiven for expecting to find a messianic figure waiting at the local watering hole, a thousand balms and psalms in hand. In fact, Good Easter's only enduring claim to fame is the enormous feat of having constructed the longest daisy chain in human memory, a staggeringly wasteful endeavour - 2120 metres long.

After another mile or two of burnt fields and rainbow irrigators, I entered another hamlet, which my map identified as *Fleshey*. The welcome sign sadly disavowed this outstanding nominative, revealing itself as the less arresting Pleshey. The main street had two principal attractions - a massive Norman earthworks glowering behind the rows of small, semi-detached houses and a brilliant local, *The Leather Bottle*. A very leathery-looking landlord sat me down with a pint of thick roadside ale and launched into a summary of the local notables. Principal among these was the revelation that Keith Flint, lead singer of *The Prodigy*, was a long time resident of Pleshey and self-acclaimed captain of the local BMX mountain biking team. As a motivator, the little bald fire starter must be amongst the best. Apparently Keith also speaks fluent Bengali. Leaving the pub behind, I pondered what 'Smack my Bitch Up' sounds like in translation.

By now I had established that Essex villages are insanely difficult to navigate. Little and Greater, Upper and Lower, nestle together in increasingly confusing whirlpools of parallel churches, parallel pubs and rival fish and chip shops. In the US, you know you're in smallville when every town's thoroughfare is simply dubbed 'Main St.' In Essex this locus is even more anonymous, reduced to the faceless 'The Street.' I spent a lot of time on The Streets.

A classic example of this kind of confusion is the village of Willingale. This little conurbation has the remarkable attribute of two churches straddling the same village green, holy doors barely a bible's throw apart. According to local legend the two edifices were constructed by rival sisters, ladies with such an aversion to one another that they could not

stand to worship the godhead under the same ceiling. You can imagine the order of service, 'and keep in your prayers our friends, families and neighbours, apart from the devil spawn over yonder.' In reality, one church looks to predate the other by several centuries, a span of years too great even for two well-preserved grudge bearers like the Sisters Grimm.

As dusk descended on my first day's hike the fading light was giving a definite M.R. James feel to every lonely dwelling I encountered. Approaching a grand Queen Anne redbrick, Langleys Hall, I passed an ominous grouping of gravestones on the driveway. Further inspection revealed this allotment to be a veritable pet graveyard, roadside home to generations of beloved familiars. The oldest grave was dated 1810; its occupant a labrador called Rudolph. The progeny of Rudolph's loins stretched across the verge, canine dynasties of pure blue blood bounding down the decades. The most recent deceased were honoured with innumerable suffixes; 'Benji the Gentlemen,' 'Faezal the Character,' or my personal favourite, 'Albert the Curious.' On the fringes less loved rodents and rabbits staked their claim to the Langley moniker. Staring into the dark recesses of the hall's great bay window, I wondered what kind of Doolittle jungle could possibly flourish in such a forbidding building.

Leaving Langleys, the last rays of an Essex sunset lit upon a tall spire, a mile or so distant. According to my omnipresent OS this was Little Leighs Church, home to a burial ground made famous by its body snatcher patrons. Thinking this was the perfect gloaming atmosphere in which to have a good nose around, I approached in high spirits. I was stopped short by a gleaming red Ferrari straddling the Church porch and beyond, a man in a silk shirt with his face at the foot of a grave, sobbing inconsolably. Gloom and doom at day's end.

Throughout my first twelve hours ambling I had noticed an increasingly disturbing trend in the birth names of Essex's public houses. That morning's *Red Rose* and *Jolly Abbott* had changed by lunchtime to such memorable abodes as *The Friendly Thistle* or the *The Unusual Inn*. By nightfall, I was passing the crooked doors of *The Last Chance* and *The Old Gallows*. This slow decline correlated with the instance of lone pitbulls and 12-year olds necking under bridges, and even a giant cock sketched in tar in the middle of a road. It was with some relief that, trudging up a hill into the town of Great Leighs, I came across the comparatively unthreatening *St. Alban's Inn*, naturally 'the oldest inn in England – established 1171.' As I unlaced my boots, absorbing this bold claim and wondering whether I would find pieces of the True Cross propping up the bar, a car pulling out of the garden beeped enthusiastically at me and wound down its window. 'We help heroes!' shouted the beaming driver, adjusting his aviators and revving off down the high street. Wearing camo gets you a long way.

My night in and around the *St. Alban's Inn* was completely bizarre. On entry I was attacked by a senile cat that only left me alone once I abandoned my backpack to its amorous administrations. Queuing behind a living, breathing Gandalf impersonator at the bar (he even had a staff), I watched a band set up in the corner, a giant banner proudly proclaiming 'The Dice People – playing music from the last century.' A more honest admission of being obsolete is hard to come by, especially considering both members wore matching Ziggy Stardust hairstyles. As the first chords of *The*

House of the Rising Sun bounced off the nodding heads of the local alcoholics, I sidestepped Gandalf's embrace and made for the payphone in the rear. Five pounds of frustration later, I left a friendly dent in the BT box and returned to the bar and the band. More relic melodies drifted across the midnight air. After a couple of pints and a cup of tea, I'd become friendly enough with the owner to ask if I could kip in the garden. Permission granted, extracting the cat from my belongings proved tricky – 'she's just an old tart' remarked the landlady, followed by, 'Bet you like an old tart once in a while.' *Run Rabbit Run*.

Day two – the earth and the heavens

At 4am I awoke in light drizzle under a pub picnic table. As the rain increased in violence I marveled at my all-weather, rubber sealed German Sniper sleeping bag. What a brilliant invention. What great foresight.

By ten-past-four the first rivers of cigarette-strewn water had entered my sacred hold, idling up my toes and then swamping my shins. Moments later, I abandoned the utterly useless military relic in the pub trolley bin and found the limited cover of a bus shelter. I had begun to doze off when a car passed by, the driver throwing two crushed red bull cans from the window. As they clattered to a stop by my feet I cursed my own lack of caffeine. A red glow appeared in the east and, sodden and sleep deprived, I began a despondent march into the morning rain.

Leaving the misery of Great Leighs far behind me, I hopped a style and followed a meandering stream out of town. A couple of early morning miles down the way, I encountered a field full of beautiful wild horses, all ebony or ivory, alternating like dominoes through the dawn mist. I felt like Robert Redford might stride past at any minute whispering sweet nothings into equine ears.

Incidentally, I have a hang-up about Robert Redford. Once, many years ago, I was lying flat on my back in the New York Planetarium. As a gigantic stellar display vaulted across the blackened ceiling and Jupiter's magnificent orb ascended from the horizon, a nasty, self-satisfied voice came out of the void. 'Hi there,' it said. 'This is the universe. And I'm Robert Redford.' What he should have said was, 'Hi there. This is the universe. And I'm a man with a megaphone, desperate to superimpose my face on your intergalactic imagination.' Robert's square jaw and blue eyes are, tragically, forever bound with my childish notions of the great beyond. Continuing through the prancing ponies and the Essex sunrise I reflected on how small Robert Redford's life and times are in the grand scheme of creation. This offered me some comfort until I remembered my own utter insignificance, one made all the more tangible by a lack of coffee. With coffee at least I would feel alive.

After a long detour around a giant reservoir I came to the village of Fairstead. It was about 7am. The drizzle hadn't given up so I took a temporary time out in the village church. Inside, I was greeted with a panoramic fresco, an army of faded angels marching the length of the nave. According to the parish pamphlet, the host had occupied this frieze frame for eight hundred years. I caught a glimpse of my face in the organ mirror, fairly miserable for a mere twenty-four

hours on the road although my complete inability to sprout facial hair had slowed the pace of tramphood. Why hadn't I thought to sleep in a Church last night? Man's last refuge – the house of God. Probably the fear of being locked in by some zealous local had stopped me from turning in with Christ. The horror of being left to languish in this inescapable stone prison, feeding off a communion diet of stale wafers and fortified wine, finding God in the final throes of starvation. I shuddered and left the angels to another millennia of silent trumpet calls.

As the rain picked up again I made it to White Notley, and the refuge of The Green Man – an 'all day, everyday pub.' Contrary to its banner advertising it was firmly closed, promising to open for 4 hours the following Monday. After hopping around in the porch for five minutes I ran for the shelter of a phone box across the road. An aggressive plant had had the same idea and I was forced to squeeze in beside this Triffid and machete a couple of fronds to get to the phone. Long abandoned, the box no longer accepted coins but I tried the operator anyway who claimed to be in Chicago but said they'd redirect me to London. Miraculously, I got through and got Jennifer to call me back. There is something hugely exciting about a public phone ringing on a deserted street in a small town, in Essex, in the rain. It almost felt historic. I guess I was pretty lucky the thing was even working at all. Most of those I'd passed had been sold by BT for a couple of quid to local councils who'd turned them into curiosity shops – full of fliers for old doilies, local fetes, or illicit geriatric love letters.

I walked for another hour or two before stumbling into Bradwell Church yard and falling asleep on the roadside bench. I woke intermittently to see snaggle-toothed old women carrying pots amongst the gravestones. I cannot confirm with hindsight how many of these visions were actual women and how many were figments of my imagination. It reminded me of a train journey to Edinburgh where I'd convinced myself, but no one else, that I'd seen Rolf Harris squatting in a railway siding, waving as we passed. Rising from my graveyard stupor, I earmarked nearby Coggleshall for a long lunch to revive my legs. Arriving at The Old Duck, I ate a rancid meal of second hand banana split while listening to a neighbouring lady's account of, 'her mother's first experience of a live crab.' I escaped the village vice and continued on my way.

Barely had Coggeshall faded in the hazy behind, when I encountered what must be East Anglia's largest sewage works. Skirting the fringe I fought mandatory swarms of flies, zealously following me down shit cloying lanes. Seeing those giant sewage scythes at close quarters was an absorbing spectacle - there's something impressive about the timeless churning of faeces beneath an Essex spring sun. Mercifully passing beyond the far end of the compound I was faced with a mass of signs warning against trespassers, 'The Police are watching you,' 'All property is marked.' Who in their right mind would break and enter a waste disposal unit? Surely the material gains are few and far between? Maybe I'm being naïve –thirty tons of human excrement hides a cauldron of gleaming copper piping ripe for the picking.

This episode was followed by a more romantic interlude. Half-way across a horizon-less field of kale, I paused to look at the seemingly endless path before and behind. Burnt into the crop, the yellow lane carved unerringly out of

sight. Overhead an old biplane approached and, passing to my right, the pilot dipped his wings in a salute. I waved enthusiastically at this fly-by greeting. Reflecting on the scene some hours later, I realized this salutation had been misconstrued and that I had simply witnessed a desperate pilot fighting his machine, probably on the verge of bailing out a few hundred feet above the spring-baked soil.

Determined to cover my quota of miles before day's end, I was a broken man by the time I crawled into the outskirts of West Bergholt. Attacked at my lowest ebb by an Essex gang, a sword-wielding co-op of psychopathic ten year olds, I employed some strikingly original expletive combinations and my walking stick to fend them off. Dragging my feet into the nearest pub and restoring speech with a powerful brew, I began a futile search for lodgings that didn't involve pitbulls and picnic tables. The landlady didn't know of anywhere but, after an extended debate on the merits of various local ditches, she nudged me toward a couple propping up the other end of the bar. After five minutes of chatting to the drunk but beneficent Joe and Angela, I found myself with an invitation to spend the night at their house, just down the road. Fortune favours the desperate.

J & A left the pub but gave me exhaustive directions to their humble home. The home turned out to be far from modest, a palace built in the infamous school of Essex excess. The most arresting feature of their abode was not its sheer enormous scale but the cars parked out front. Two gleaming magnolia porches sat side-by-side with the number plates *GUM 1* and *GUM 2* emblazoned on their rear ends. Joe and Angela were dentists. After a brief introduction to their bewildered son Mark, a miracle shower and another beer, I went to bed amidst professions of eternal gratitude. Turning out the light in my attic room, the Bergholt street lamps fell on a Les Paul guitar in the rafters above me, shining like a chrome God in my dreamless sleep.

Day three – the sea and the land

On the third day I rose again. Grafting some spare skin on to my misshapen feet, I tip toed out onto the landing as my watch registered 5am. I had not gone halfway down the stairs when the double-door to the master bedroom burst open behind me and Annabel shot forth in her pink negligee.

'Coffee Jack?!' she bellowed in a dawn-shattering stage whisper. I meekly replied, 'Lovely.'

To the coffee was added a much appreciated bowl of cornflakes and, just when I thought the milk of human kindness could not keep flowing, Annabel turned to the oven and revealed a gigantic, three-tier birthday cake. 'Oh please no' I thought. Mark, the birthday boy, is in bed with four hours to go until he greets his 17th year, and here's his loving mother offering a complete stranger the first cut of the cake. My adamant refusals were blown aside by Annabel's whirlwind of violent generosity and I left the house slice in hand, a single candle guttering in the daybreak.

After some completely unnecessary early morning detours I found myself standing over the A12's steady stream of traffic. Here was the tarmac leviathan I had bypassed, the same old road that I'd driven up and down for decades. I

paused for a moment of self-righteous reflection on the futility of motorized travel. Grim face followed grim face behind the wheel, an endless funeral procession bound for the office pyre. Relishing my freedom, I wandered off into Dedham Vale.

Constable country is exactly as one imagines it. The cows seem to stand with an added sense of dignity, chewing the cud a fraction slower. They pause considerately to give the passer-by a better bovine profile. I couldn't resist going for a quick swim in a particularly scenic oxbow curve of the Stour. Wading into this perfect rural backdrop actually felt like assaulting a Constable canvas – a bit like a streaker in a time warp. I expected to see a shocked 18th century peasant amble by, pitchfork in hand, mouth agape. Reaching Dedham itself, the town appeared over the horizon as a perfect scale model, all matching trees and shining shop signs. Twee it may be but I ate the breakfast of my life in a corner café on the high street, the most remarkable part of which was that my coffee, crumpet, egg, bacon and bill, were all served by a different beaming waitress.

Beyond Constable and over the hill, the monotonous marching began to take its toll. I nearly stumbled into the path of the Norwich Express, thundering past as I put a blind step onto the neighbouring rails. After dissecting a few more fields I took a brief rest at Lawford Church, a citadel of sculpted ceilings and dead flies, before entering Manningtree.

Long-lost Manningtree. Apart from a few handsome towers that mark its trading heyday there is nothing left in a town beset by vagrant tourism and caravan collectives. Stroll down to the waterfront. Watch a figure in shimmering lycra attempting to force-feed a swan half-eaten 99 flakes and you have seen a still shot of hell and the worst it will hold. Add to this the fact that the swan is dying of leprosy, having spent its short life sponging off Manningtree's malt factories, and you plum the depths. Thousands of them floated in a quagmire of beer cans, fag ends and beach balls – the fallen angels of the avian world. I hobbled out of the back end of town as fast as my little legs would carry me.

Continuing on in radiant sunshine, a soaked handkerchief saved my scalp from the horizon. I took a break at Bradfield, notable for a Church tower that was set ablaze by arsonists in the 18th century. As the fire guttered and died the Bradfield bell dropped from the flaming rafters with a pyrotechnical clang and blazed into the catacombs. The tower was never replaced but the bell, resurrected from the ashes, can now be found caged at ground level, forever tolling by the roadside.

The final miles to Harwich were a contrast of natural beauty and personal agony. Stumbling through a land of windmills, wild horses and sea grass, my knees had started to adopt a bow-legged posture. A regrettable second swim in a Stour estuary sunset had frozen my muscles into a kind of living rigor mortis and, crawling onto the Harwich waterfront, I felt completely washed up. Our distant ancestors hauled their be-blubbered bodies out of the seas but I felt a strong urge to return to the oblivion of the ocean and get lost in a rip-tide. Legions of seaside scooter gangs passed in the dusk, revving and beeping at each other. Stray seagulls screamed overhead. Totally lost and increasingly forlorn, I stopped to ask for directions to a hostel. Foolishly, the oracle I consulted for this information was a man with twenty

kippers in his mouth. Masticating on a mass of smoked fish, he proceeded to point in all four compass directions. I chose the most emphatic of his signals and continued on.

Finally I found a dockside B & B. *The Samuel Pepys Inn* was a beacon in the dark – a seesawing sign trailing its namesake's famous wig beneath the salty eaves. Entering the lounge the mother tongue appeared to be Dutch, a curiosity later explained by the offshore turbine project consuming the labours of Holland's finest. The landlady was not Dutch and abandoned the seething bar for a moment to haul me up to my room. Unfortunately the room was in the attic, four floors up, and a moment's respite on a bar stool seemed to have been too much for my wasted legs. Mounting the first stairs I felt mildly nauseous, gestured frantically at the landlady's bottom and then fainted cold into the deep shag carpet. Waking moments later, face to the Paisley print, a now distinctly peeved landlady prodded me in the foot. Half an hour on and I found myself curled in a cold foetal ball with a plate of tepid lasagne balanced on my crotch. This was undoubtedly the low tide of adventure.

Day four – the sun, the moon and the stars

I sweated through the night as the extractor fan died and the Dutchman next door attacked something inanimate but clearly infuriating. Awaking in better shape, having dosed myself with a clutch of painkillers on turning in, I devoured a black pudding breakfast then gingerly hobbled down to the waterfront again. My scheduled meeting with the ferryman began tensely when I trod on his hand while boarding. As the only passenger I had also clearly pulled him out of bed. Halfway across the harbour mouth we had made our peace and he was eagerly telling tales of his grandfather's heroics at Dunkirk. These legendary exploits were made considerably more tangible when it transpired there was no pier on the Felixstowe side of the estuary mouth. Instead, the old ferry dropped a steel ramp onto the incoming shingle and I charged off barrels blazing into the enemy lines. Suffolk soil at last.

My gallop ran out of steam up the hill into Felixstowe and, begrudgingly, I stopped off on the High Street to buy up Boot's finest knee braces, a pair of beige beauties that added little to my fading respectability. Rounding the corner at Felixstowe Ferry, I was very nearly beheaded as several balls of plastic death departed the seaside golf course, en route to Holland and a triple bogey. The ferry terminal when I got to it consisted of a ping-pong bat on a piece of string, which a beaming quayside commentator told me was the only way to get attention. Sure enough as soon as I raise this semaphore an ancient engine could be heard groaning into life across the water and I was duely picked up. My Captain for this short crossing was one John Barker, heir to a ferryman dynasty of many generations standing. His only comment when I came on board was genuinely insulting – 'You look like a Morris dancer on heat.' I could have pointed out that he had an Easter egg tattooed on his ear, but he probably knew that already.

Parting with this scathing Charon on the Bawdsey side, I hiked up the riverbank to a café on stilts, listing slightly but boldly claiming to serve 'the best coffee in the world.' As I had definitely experienced the worst coffee on the planet at

my hostel I was prepared to acquiesce. Two cups and a Suffolk flapjack down and my legs twitched back into life. The lady at the bar let me use her mobile to drop a quick call home. I left a babbling message full of biblical references to the prodigal son and a need for ice cream.

The homeward stretch turned out to be longer than anticipated. Skirting Martello towers, some ruinous others bedecked with billionaire's sun beds, and failing to ford the various creeks, added unwanted miles to the final day. Tramping through shingle is particularly hard work but pausing to beach comb in the sea cliff's orange shadows relieved the drudge. I ate my final figs on a great but absent friend's bench at Shingle Street and then ploughed on, up the coast and home. Fatigue merged cows with pillboxes and sky with river, but I was finally on tracks I knew. Emerging from Sudbourne forest a stone throw's from the end, a large, gleaming 4x4 nearly ran me down, exactly the kind of bastard mobile I'd been cursing for the last 100 miles. It turned out to contain my beloved family who, after offering to give me a lift the last mile, sped away to prepare a bath full of bleach.

Stranger than fiction, harder than hoped, I could not of asked for a more varied journey and, for the first time in my life, I felt like a true Son of England.

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