

Prologue

I had never seen a more pitiful animal. And to say he was man's best friend—no matter how lonely that man might be—was stretching the believable a little too far.

He was the sum result of generations of hasty, indiscriminate dog sex, and a lifetime of debauchery and spleen had done nothing to upgrade his social standing. He looked like a canine version of that old classmate you haven't seen for years: the one who had a drug and alcohol dependency at sixteen, who worked on building sites during the summer and on fishing trawlers during the winter and who idled away his evenings making trouble in backstreet bars.

He may once have been a fighter of some repute, although I wasn't convinced. One ear had been bitten off so cleanly it still showed the shape and condition of his attacker's teeth. He was ocularly deficient by one, dentally deficient by about twenty-seven (I was too craven to venture into his mouth to make a detailed inventory) and follicly deficient by a number too great to even guess at, let alone joke about. He had the limp of a war veteran; the hacking, expectorating cough of a pensioner who has smoked forty Capstan Full Strength a day since birth; and a smell even worse than the person who sits next to you on a long-haul flight in economy class on the world's cheapest airline—that's how bad.

He was sitting, for want of a better word, emitting odours like an old trainer and wheezing like a bicycle pump outside the gate the day I moved in. He was still there at the end of my first week. When I tried to shoo him away, he would get wearily to his feet, give me a martyred look with his good eye and hobble into the road to wait for something to come along and hit him and put him out of his misery. I checked with a neighbour and was given, almost gleefully, two unbelievable pieces of information. First, he came with the house. (The previous occupants, having done a runner in the middle of the night, had bequeathed him to me, along with a cockroach infestation, a mountain of unpaid bills and a blocked toilet.) And second, his name was Lucky.

In my “previous life”, as well as having a steady job, some money and a decent country pile, I had an attractive family, from my well-presented wife to my glamorous daughter to cats and rabbits that could have made the pages of *Fur and Feather* any day of the week. So to be told that this sorry excuse for an animal was now mine was a portent I should have paid heed to. Yet for reasons that showed precious little cognitive thought on my part, and that I’m still at a loss to explain to anyone, not least to myself, I pampered him like a Crufts champion and loved him like an only child.

I set myself two projects: to make him smell sweeter and to find him a more suitable name. I was to dedicate a large part of my life to making him smell sweeter, but renaming him was easy. As he was clearly the most pathetic specimen of protoplasm ever to draw breath and limp the face of the earth, I renamed him, and it’s obvious if you think about it, Un-lucky. And within a week, every schoolkid in the road was

adding the prefix as though it had always been there. After years of being shackled with a name he couldn't possibly live up to, he finally had one he could do justice to, one he could be proud of.

Accrediting me with his liberation, he repaid me by being my first and most loyal friend in this new land, guarding me and my house with a conceit that was a joy to behold. The fact that the worst injury he could inflict was a nasty suck was of little consequence. He looked mean and he smelt mean, both far greater deterrents to anyone who wished me harm than had he been a well-groomed Alsatian with a studded collar, a set of pearly-white gnashers and a name like Prince.

I bathed him twice a week, the regimen beginning with toilet cleaner (one that promised to get rid of all stubborn stains, even in those hard-to-reach places), followed by disinfectant and then finally my best shampoo and conditioner. I fed him the finest meat I could afford and spiked it with a range of doggy vitamins that promised to make his nose wet, his coat shine and his eyes (or in his case, eye) sparkle. Yet whatever I did, whatever I administered, he remained just as he was on that fateful day when our paths first crossed. In the early evenings as he lay under the sun canopy, alternately snapping at mosquitoes and licking his testicles (imagine getting that the wrong way round), I worried that the pall of odours that hung over him would ignite if someone threw a match in his general direction.

My house is in a quiet road on the outskirts of the town of Ipoh, the capital of the state of Perak in northwestern Peninsular Malaysia, a steamy corner of Southeast Asia as

diametrically opposite to the land of my ancestors as it can get. And it is this geographical fact that causes me many times during the day to stop whatever task I am going about, look meditatively into the picturesque and hazy distance and ask myself, “Where the hell am I?”

I came here to experience a different culture, to meet new people, to learn another language, to savour exotic foods, to walk unfamiliar roads, to escape British television and to write the Great British Travelogue.

I had long fancied the idea of living overseas: being a foreigner in someone else’s land seemed like a whole lot more fun than being one in my own. This had struck me during my first trip to lands afar. I was ten years old and went to Calais with my parents. Six hours later we came back! But it was enough. A brief liaison though it was, the seed of providence had been sown—the first organic part of the man I was to become. I can still recall the frisson of awakening that brushed my nether regions, not when Katie Blake flashed me her navy-blue gym knickers, but when it dawned on me that there was intelligent life beyond the horizon (or as intelligent as life gets in a northern French seaside town). For if there was life beyond *my* horizon, I reasoned, then there must be life beyond *their* horizon ... and so on, presumably, forever.

I was brought up on a pig farm in a small Oxfordshire village, and only once went so far that I couldn’t smell it. It was such a remote outpost that I do not remember one foreign visitor ever passing through, much to my rancour. Nonetheless, it did play host to three émigrés, each conspicuous by not being Oxfordshire village indigenous or porcine (which is much the same thing).

Plaski was Polish. He was our milkman. A displaced person from World War II, so my mother said. A man of impeccable manners, clinical grooming and perfect dress sense, he never learnt to speak a word of English beyond what was required to deliver milk. He drove his float as though it were a glass carriage and cared for it as a chauffeur cares for a vintage Rolls-Royce. Yet all this culture and attention fell unceremoniously around his ankles once a year, at Yuletide. Back in the days before breathalysers, it was customary for householders to offer a little tippie to those tradesmen who, throughout the year, had fought all weathers to deliver their goods. It was during the partaking of this age-old custom that Plaski became even more displaced. As he made his way down the village, accepting one mulled wine after the other, his driving steadily deteriorated until it gave up on him altogether a few houses short of the end of his round. His gleaming float would then career across the road and nosedive into the nearest ditch, from where a string of obscenities in perfect barrack-room English could be heard being offered to the universe at large.

Gruffydd Marlais Llywelyn-Jones wasn't foreign in a geographical sense, although he was in every other way. A true wit and the village's only member of the intelligentsia, you never knew when he was being serious or merely having a bit of fun with you. With a playful wink, he once told me that he came from Llareggub, a Welsh seaside town. But I never found such a place on the map. Dylan Thomas was his hero and role model, and he would recite and impersonate him at every opportunity. After the demon drink had taken hold—he claimed he could drink forty pints a night—he would walk the

streets eating Liquorice Allsorts and sprouting doggerel about what bastards the English were interlarded with snatches of *Under Milk Wood*. He did it so convincingly that some believed he really *was* Dylan Thomas.

Tex said he was from Texas, and he dressed to dispel any doubts. He wore chaps and a ten-gallon hat just to take his dog for a walk. He pitched horseshoes on his front lawn, shot tin cans off fence posts with an airgun and bragged to anyone who would listen that he was a Texan oil millionaire. Although what a Texan oil millionaire was doing living in a council house in the depths of rural Oxfordshire and driving a Ford Anglia, no one knew. But it didn't matter as it was all utter magic to an impressionable youngster preparing himself for a life shovelling silage and mucking out pigs.

Sunday afternoon television compounded the allure. Cross-legged, nose pressed against a nine-inch cathode ray tube, I sat spellbound through black-and-white movies of chisel-jawed all-American heroes fighting buck-teethed, short-sighted Japanese in the Pacific, of Humphrey Bogart eyeing up the women in a dusty North African bar or of Orson Welles captaining a tramp steamer in the seas around Hong Kong. I drooled over the exploits of Hans and the delectable Lotte Hass, at froggy Jacques Cousteau at the helm of the *Calypso* and at *Born Free's* wholesome Joy Adamson romping with her lion cubs. And I almost went into convulsions over the Brooke Bond tea commercials. Not because of the antics of the chimps and their amusing English patois but because of the association with the rolling, mist-covered hills of a distant land, a place where dusky-skinned Ceylonese girls in brightly coloured saris picked tea leaves (Brooke Bond tea leaves, of course).

Then later when I was abed, tucked up with my *National Geographic*—a journal I studied as devoutly, and as credulously, as most God-fearing villagers studied the Bible or my school friends the Ladies' Foundation Garments and Stockings section of the *Marshall Ward Mail Order Catalogue*—I let my imagination take me to other faraway places: Mombasa, Nairobi, Madagascar, Zanzibar, Mandalay, Borneo. Names that tripped from my tongue with a ring of poetry and that conjured images of long sunny days, warm sultry nights and dark exotic peoples. It was a dream idyll that exulted my spirit and moved it to see visions far beyond my age and knowledge.

Regardless of what later came to pass and whatever nonsense I was subsequently fed, I still retain a strangely vivid memory of each of these events, and the romance, as I saw it, has never quite left me.

Why I thought I could write a book, I do not know. My singular O level was in woodwork and my literary oeuvre amounted to a letter published in *Smallholder*. But, by God, I could read. Basically, anything I could get my hands on, from Cornflakes packets to *War and Peace*. Although I admit there was much I didn't understand. I mean, just what *are* complex carbohydrates?

It has always seemed to me that travel and writing (and film-making for that matter) go hand in hand. What is the point of hiking to the back of beyond, risking death and disease, admiring great landscapes, witnessing never-to-be-repeated sunsets and participating in wild, drunken festivals if you don't record something of these events and experiences on paper or

celluloid? I also believed—erroneously as I later found out—that people who went away to write books in distant lands were rugged and worldly individuals who drank and fought and womanised as Hemingway did. It is a myth, of course, like all the others created by the manipulators of our senses: poets, musicians, film-makers, the producers of *Baywatch*. Yet I'm a sucker for them. Why else would I have daydreamed about sitting at an old Royal typewriter, by a window with an ocean view, beneath a slow churning ceiling fan, with an absinthe and water at hand and with my loyal dog curled up at my feet?

The reality, as reality does, offered no semblance of the fantasy. My view is not of the ocean, it is of the house opposite; the slow churning fan has to spin like an aircraft propeller at the point of take-off to save me from spontaneous human combustion; the absinthe and water is Brooke Bond tea bag and water; and as for my loyal dog, he would rather have his nose in a dustbin or up some local bitch's bottom than be curled up at my feet.

I could have washed up anywhere. Malaysia was the unwitting recipient because it had foolishly allowed my wife to be born there. I made my first visit some twenty-five years ago as a holidaymaker. It was over more horizons than seemed possible and hotter than I imagined hell to be. The sun seared my eyeballs, the humid air clung like a wet army greatcoat and the peaty, fruity reek of Asia, after a lifetime of coal fires, boiled cabbage and suet pudding, sent my olfactory receivers into spasm. It was the storied East, possessed of Oriental charm and tropical deliciousness, and it took my breath away (and I still haven't got it back).

Smitten, I sketched verbal pictures of what I had seen to anyone I could buttonhole long enough to listen. (The pigs would sit enthralled for hours.) I devoured books about the region as easily as I devoured food for sustenance. And what I read—from W. Somerset Maugham to Leslie Thomas, from Joseph Conrad to Anthony Burgess, from guidebooks to academic treatises—drew me ever more towards it. Marco Polo, who has long been a hero of mine (I once bought a pair of his trousers), gave a description of this part of the world when he first came upon it. In *The Travels of Marco Polo*, he said that he saw “a world almost totally unknown to western Christendom: a place of legendary kingdoms, weird creatures, exotic peoples and fabled riches”. And that’s pretty much how I saw it.

I returned many times and, after each paradisiacal trip, its subtleties began to worm their way under my skin by degrees until they became the embodiment of all that I had ever wanted. By the time I reached my mid-life apocalypse (a time when the future looked frighteningly predictable, when I thought they would bury me in my wellingtons, give me a fine send-off and forget me the next day, and when I was finally and gloriously no longer economically beholden to any one or any concern), it was the obvious bolthole. I mean, if you are bent on living overseas, you may as well go the whole hog. Little point going native a piffling 22 miles from your home shores.

Southeast Asia has long had a reputation for being an unpredictable and dangerous part of the world. Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar and, now sadly, Thailand, to a degree,

still are. Yet Malaysia (and Singapore)—if you'll allow me a sweeping generalisation that can be disproved at any function with free food—is about as safe and as civilised as it gets outside Bristol city centre on a Saturday night.

Malaysia is considered, by those who know about these things, to be one of the world's most peaceful and successful multiracial, multi-religious and multicultural societies. The country has certainly had plenty of time to get used to the idea. Back in the fifteenth century when Malacca was one of the great entrepôts of the world, virtually every racial, cultural and ethnological variant of humanity could be observed wandering the streets garbed in national dress or national war paint jabbering in any one of more than eighty different languages (imagine Heathrow Airport's Terminal 3 on a Sunday afternoon and you'll get the picture). They came from the Spice Islands of the Malay Archipelago, Thailand, China, India, Portugal, Holland and Britain. And with these vastly different peoples came their vastly different philosophies, religions, customs and art. Malaysia's plural, and later hybridised, society was being formed around the time that men first began building boats. That is why today everyone goes peaceably about their business, whether praying to their god (Allah, Buddha, Lord Muruga, Jesus or Mary), hustling in the market (stock or veg) or asleep (on a charpoy in a five-foot way or on a hammock strung between two coconut trees).

Although Malay, now known as Bahasa Malaysia, is the official language these days, everyone still speaks in whatever tongue takes their fancy. English used to be the lingua franca but it went into decline soon after independence in 1957 when Bahasa supplanted English as

the medium of education. Consequently, English became just another subject, the quality deteriorated and the need for it eventually questioned. As a result, a whole generation (ironically, mostly Malays) can only speak Bahasa, a charming language, I concede, but not one that opens many doors outside their own region. But as the rest of the world lurches pell-mell towards the information technology age, this “mistake in history”, as the Government has suddenly begun calling it, is being redressed. Mastering English “must be a national priority” is the cry of the Malaysian Students Association. (Now, if the equivalent body in the UK could start a similar campaign ...) The outcome of all this linguistic bugging about is that English can now be heard spoken as accurately and as charmingly as a schoolboy reading Dickens aloud, as a bastardised version, as hilarious pidgin or not at all. However, and this is the point, enough of the population speaks it proficiently enough to be able to converse with me and to understand some of what I say—and what a refreshing change that makes.

The peninsula’s burgeoning population currently stands at about 20 million. My landlord is an ivory-skinned Chinese (one of 30 per cent of the population). He has a face that has been slept on since birth, a brutal haircut of the type they used to give prisoners, a perfectly hemispherical beer gut and a nasty belching condition. He wears only singlets and pyjama bottoms, so always looks as if he has just woken up or is just going to bed. When he isn’t collecting my rent, he can be found at coffee shops gorging pigs’ intestines, supine at illegal opium dens chasing the dragon or at the turf club gambling away his savings.

The family opposite are cinnamon-brown Malays (representing 50 per cent of the population). He shows his face about once a week on account of having to service three other demanding wives the rest of the time. She is a dour, semi-recluse with all the accoutrements of a first wife: sad hair, bad complexion, unadventurous thighs and a truly mammoth pair of milk-secreting glandular organs. Yet on Fridays, the Muslim Sabbath, she metamorphoses into a startlingly colourful butterfly and flits from the house light of foot trailing yards of silk like a little girl going to a birthday party.

The hawker who makes my chapatti breakfast is a molasses-skinned Indian (one of 12 per cent of the population). As with most Indians who have made a rupee or two, he thinks he's a Bollywood movie star: hair fussily coiffured and held into place with coconut oil, a moustache of truly ferret-like appearance and proportions and enough matted chest hair and gold chains to send the town's bereft females to heaven and back.

The remaining 8 per cent of the population is made up of Orang Asli, Arabs, Indonesians, Filipinos and *Seranis* (the often-beautiful progeny of hot and steamy liaisons between comely locals and randy Europeans). And I, a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant pig farmer with the brass neck audacity to believe that I could come here and write the Great British Travelogue, shared the country with them all.

The forces of circumstance, coincidence, middle age and reverie had brought me here along an ulcerated and labyrinthine road that started many years before, at Calais.

Now, having finally crossed the Rubicon, it was up to the country to come up with the goods and honour its part of the deal. And I didn't doubt for a second that it would come up short, for I knew it to have something for everyone. If not, then why have so many from other lands made it their home?

There was colonial Malaya. Was it really an era of racism, oppression, injustice, tea dances, tiffins and cool clothes? How did the British get involved? Why did they stay so long? What did they do to the country when they were there? What good did they leave behind? And what bad? What prompted young men to give up a perfectly good life in Blighty, hitchhike to Tilbury, hop aboard a Peninsula and Oriental steamer and sail steerage to the other side of the world, to a place that was the social and geographical antithesis of their original milieu, to seek their fame and fortune at the risk of probable death and certain disease? The colonial era threw up its fair share of characters: prospectors, pioneers, adventurers, opportunists, businessmen and soldiers of fortune. I had already met a few, and one thing they all had in common—other than happy memories, ageing bodies, eccentricity, a drink problem, malaria and an embarrassing and recurring crotch itch—was that they all loved to reminisce. And I am an inveterate note-taker, who never leaves home without a notebook and sharp pencil.

Then there were the Japanese and the Occupation. How did they manage to brush aside the British so easily? What did they do when in charge, other than lop off a few heads and defile a few young ladies? Then there were the Communists and the Emergency. What was that all about?

I would soon find out, and much more besides.