

The Dip

By the time New Year's Eve rolled around we'd already had two whole days, as well as their three attendant nights, of reasonably solid merrymaking. We were out west, just outside C---, staying in a cottage on our friend Bleddyn's family farm, and we'd dug ourselves in. We'd filled the fridge and moved the feast that was our day-to-day existence at that time westwards with almost professional ease. The farm itself belonged to his uncle and auntie. His mother's brother had inherited it on the understanding that he manage it on behalf of the various siblings and their various husbands and wives and children. As estates went, however, it wasn't, and hadn't ever been, much of a legacy - more an open-ended invitation to toil and worry. This was according to Bledd himself. And this invitation his uncle had accepted until, regrettably, he could accept no longer.

The cottage we had at our disposal, for a few days either side of the day itself (the night, that is), was one of the old outbuildings - the old dairy, in fact. Bleddyn's auntie and uncle had started renovating it a few years previously when it had become increasingly clear that the old ways were useful enough for the discharging of duties to the expectant deceased but less practical when it came to putting bread in the equally expectant mouths of the living. They'd restored it bit by bit, as time and money became available, and Bledd had done his bit too. He told us how they'd knocked down the old porch one Christmas Day, working off the excess turkey with big sledgehammer blows. They'd planned on letting the place out, when it was finished, to holiday-makers or prospective second homeowners,

who came to stay in the area only when the winter rains had dispersed and while they decided whether or not the now spongy peagreen fields were quaint enough to merit the release of their meticulously accumulated equity. Bledd's uncle had died just before they finished the work properly and his auntie, suddenly overwhelmed as much by labour as by grief, had simply left things as they were, not overly troubled by the fact that in doing so she was letting her husband's dream, of seeing rich city folk tramp across his land, go unfulfilled.

The place was pleasingly unfinished however and, after his auntie left us to our own devices the evening of our arrival, we got our hands dirty with wood and coal and warmed into the place. Soon enough, we'd even persuaded ourselves that not only was its mish-mash charm particularly charming - even more so than it might have been pristinely finished - but that it lent itself particularly well also to the way we'd been put together as a group. Bleddyn, for example, I'd known properly since the sixth form and he was, in many ways, as unfussy and doggedly untrendy as the horse brasses that adorned the old fireplace in the living room. But he was a comfortable fit too, after ten years or so of close accord, like the worn armchairs that had been recycled to the cottage after becoming unfit for purpose up at the main house. The others too - we were seven in total - had their equivalents in and around the place; the colourful and pretty tiles in the downstairs bathroom, for example, or the shiny new kitchen units or even the electric whisk that had made it into the new century from the 1970s still in reasonable working order. The cottage's rough edges - exposed pipework here and there, or the wind which rattled through a little gap above the not-quite-flush bathroom window - were the incursions of the "real", to which we'd adapted with varying degrees of various

definitions of success as we went about making our lives.

We'd spent the previous few days doing as we did - walking, eating and drinking, playing games and talking. We stayed up late and ended up having to make do with as much daylight as a late, meandering breakfast and a more or less chaotic chain of command permitted. By lunchtime on New Year's Eve, though, we were all present and correct and assembled up at the farmhouse to eat with Bleddyn's auntie. She'd insisted we come and we were more than happy to go. She'd made pies and tarts and bread and supplied cheeses in seemingly endless quantities. JJ (so-called because of his resemblance to the young, side-burned JJ Williams) took it upon himself to do most of the talking. He was a sparky North Coaster, from Prestatyn way, and spoke English with an accent that verged on the Liverpoolian. He was a good man to have around; he had a way of being friendly and polite with people he didn't know, or members of the older generation, as it were, that didn't compromise his own personality in the slightest. He employed a gentle teasing, which came entirely naturally, and which seemed to invite an equally natural and spirited response. I don't think he could have pulled it off had it been affected in any way - and I remember thinking to myself what an admirable quality that was to have. Bleddyn didn't say much while we were in the house, which I put down to an oddness I'd felt myself on a number of occasions - that of two normally exclusive spheres turning together for a while. It was a funny thing having to be the conduit between two worlds. It could make you think you didn't belong to either, if you weren't careful.

When we left Bledd's auntie, the sun was low and bright. The rays seemed to curve towards us over the tree-lined crest in the middle distance and everywhere that wasn't long black shadow was a glowing

Christmas orange. It was cold, though, and even though it was only a five minute walk across the field to the cottage, we were glad when we got back to shut the door tight behind us.

We started getting ready for the evening's entertainment straight away, though there wasn't much to it, in all honesty. Gareth, one of Bledd's university friends originally, was a pretty gifted cook and, for the most part, we left him to it, topping him up with beer every so often when we felt guilty about not doing much to help. Bledd and I tidied the place up a bit, then we dragged the kitchen table into the living room and set it with crackers and pink Disney-princess plastic cups, bought for 39p a pack in the Hyper Value in C--- town centre. We made a fire, mixed some cocktails and made ourselves useful, finally, by drinking them.

The early part of the evening seemed to pass remarkably quickly. That was the cocktails taking hold, no doubt. Dinner was a convivial affair - in the old-fashioned sense of the word. The girls had dressed up for the occasion and the boys tied ties over T-shirts or jumpers. JJ told us about a friend of his who'd just come back from Beijing, where the eager-to-please Christmas decorations at his hotel had included a crucified Father Christmas.

The amiability reached its high point around eleven, I would say. We were just finishing dessert then and had taken in alcohol and food in quantities optimal to the inducement of bonhomie. We were full enough, that is, for our senses to be slightly dulled - which meant that things weren't as laugh-out-loud funny as they'd been while we were still hungry but that they were more consistently satisfying. By a quarter to midnight, however, the "celebrations" were effectively over. People were already looking at their watches and anticipating the countdown to midnight, waiting for the

forced festivity to pass so that we could just get on with it. Every twenty seconds or so, somebody piped up with 'Ten! Nine! Eight!', as if to test the boundaries of repetition, comedy and trance, and we ended up missing the actual turn of the year. (I was sorry to miss it, I have to say, however dubious the notion of building an entire celebration around one moment may be. I wouldn't go so far as to say it had mystical qualities necessarily, but the hands coming together full north or the digits changing to 00:00 have always seemed to me to be invested with a deeper secret - one we used to know, perhaps, but have since forgotten.)

Sometime later, then, after an hour or so talking and digesting, in splinter groups of twos and three, we got a game going. Joni had brought along his Christmas-present poker set, complete with green baize tablecloth, and we sat around the table with the lights dimmed. It was only then that things took a slight turn for the morose. Gareth won when he should have lost, betting his life savings and coming up trumps on two pairs, much to everyone else's annoyance. JJ lost when he should have won, falling to a last-card flush and, suddenly, out of the festive full, there was tension in the air. As I mentioned earlier, it might not have been, there and then, anything more than an accumulation of tiredness, or our Methodist subconsciouses reacting to the indulgence - but there it was all the same.

The game moved quickly. Mererid dropped out first. She'd enjoyed throwing her chips around at least and threw the last of them into the middle with somewhat masochistic glee. Then Gareth, whose descent was as meteoric as his initial ascent. JJ got tired of betting responsibly for little or no reward and threw everything on a well-disguised but

ill-timed bluff. Then Luned, frustrated, departed to be followed shortly after by Joni. He stayed around for a while, watching and commentating occasionally, but got tired of that as well and went up to bed like the others. Leaving just Bledd and me.

We played nicely initially, as if to say that we could be better than some petty shows of annoyance. We bet small and, for a while, whenever either of us won, we passed the pile of chips back across the table on the next hand. The heavy silence of the early hours came upon us, though, giving proceedings an untimely air. The nagging was still there, and thicker now. With Joni and JJ gone to bed, we spoke Welsh.

‘What have you got?’

‘Queen high.’

‘And you thought you’d win with that.’

‘I was waiting for the straight.’

It was no surprise that Bleddyn and I were the last two up. We’d always been the ones most likely to be still drinking after it had stopped being either wise or beneficial to the prevailing mood. We grew up within ten miles of each other, he just down the road from where we were staying, not on the farm itself but as near as dammit, me over in C-- , a village consisting of rugby club, post office and often genuinely hilarious locals. Our appreciation of each other had deepened steadily with the passing years, as we’d shared houses, shared the long journey back home on weekends and shared the inching spread of our bellies. You didn’t warm to him straight away. You allowed him his stern, though always reasoned and heartfelt, views and only then, when some time had passed, did you get around to thinking that he was, in fact, as dear a person as you could hope to meet.

It wasn't a question of simple annoyance with Bledd, then. He'd probably pissed me off more times than I'd actually been aware of over the years, so I was well used to his little ticks. Once in a while, though, he managed to get under your skin. It was as if, every now and then, he could just dispense with sociability. Whether he was aware of it or not, I don't know, but he'd let you stew all the same - and he seemed to be in one of those moods now. It might equally, to be fair to him, have been the game itself, a subconscious tactic or my sense of him as an opponent. But whatever it was, I'd taken against him suddenly, and the more I thought about his stubborn mass opposite me, the more precarious I seemed to feel. I remember it quite clearly - coming together in the course of losing a hand to a jammy three-of-a-kind. It was as if, for the first time in all our time together, I could imagine not being so.

The game continued and I started to play a little harder. As the silence deepened and the night rolled on, I could feel myself becoming increasingly entrenched, my consciousness battening down as if to protect itself from attacks - both inside the game and out. A little while again and I was formulating my detachment from Bledd and from the group; preparing for the time when it would no longer be the viable proposition it was then. Or I'd realised - aided no doubt by evil spirits - that we might only be disappointed in each other finally. I could feel my back hunching over, and imagined my head ever more prominent on my shoulders, my nose the beak of a particularly fierce-looking bird of prey. I won a big hand, with a bullying, aggressive play and liked the feeling of self-harming power that came with it.

Bleddyn won a big one himself a few turns later and I looked up at him, interested to know whether seeing him (I'd been concentrating on the

green of the baize for what seemed like hours) might illuminate the situation, make it less odd, or remind us that we were, nevertheless, friends of long standing and still ostensibly celebrating that fact.

As soon as I caught his eye, I felt surging reassurance and an urge to tell him just what it was I'd been thinking. I felt that if I could only explain what had taken hold of me I'd be able to push it down even as it struggled to make its way to the surface. Something was preventing me from beginning, however. I seemed to know already that Bledd wouldn't look on the matter either as I wanted to or as I would have wanted him to. Or even that he might deliberately construe my words in such a way as to extract from them maximum incomprehension. A second or so passed as we looked both at each other and at other points less precise in ordinary descriptions of space. In that time my mood changed slightly, bringing forth a sort of cautioning inertia. That is to say, I was aware now that giving voice to these new insinuations, before knowing exactly what they were, might itself change things. And it was late, of course, the ticking of the clock less a marker of time by then than an entire dramatising system. The virtue of keeping quiet was clear and I wanted above all to subdue Bleddyn to my quiet tone.

He leant forward to gather a big pile of chips I'd just conceded, as much from my new-found acquiescence as from having nothing better in my hand than a nine. After arranging them into their respective piles and forming the piles into columns, he sat back in his chair. When he spoke, it was as if he'd read my earlier thoughts in order, precisely, to speak them back at me.

'You know, I reckon I'll have to move back here soon ... I won't be able to stay in Cardiff forever ... I'll have to move back. Be around the place. You

know.'

He paused.

'It's not the same for me. You know, the farm ... '

A look of apology spread across his face and down into his body so that he had to readjust himself in his chair. He was a completely different being all of a sudden. I'd long been in the habit of disagreeing with Bledd and only then stopping to consider what he'd actually said. He'd caught me out completely this time, though, and at the very mention of my rivals for his company - the people (I thought of his auntie on her own in the house) or even the land itself, who'd get used to having him around again and not heed the enormous grace bestowed on them - I felt myself deflate. And it was no longer a matter of choice, to voice or not my feelings. Or even to say that I knew exactly what he meant and that, me too, it made me sad.

We sat back for a while after that, leaning forward occasionally to lift glasses to our lips but not really drinking. The game was petering out. Less drunk than jaded now, my head was beginning to loll. I felt buffeted about.

As I was taking the last of Bledd's chips off him, when he'd surrendered more or less meekly, I remembered something I'd meant to mention earlier, in the first flush of our head-to-head. I was going to suggest that the loser pay a forfeit: run into the sea in the morning in his pants and throw himself under before coming back out. It seemed almost comically irrelevant now, particularly since we'd been rendered effectively immobile over the last few hours - or else it was the forfeit in a much bigger game. I mentioned it anyway.

'You know, we should go for a dip tomorrow, in the sea. Start the new

year clean and all that. What do you reckon?’

He looked up at me and smiled.

‘Why not.’

The dolorous feeling with which I took myself off to bed, and to sleep finally, didn’t shift overnight. If anything, it even augmented itself with resignation and I woke up feeling as though my very will to life were being impeded.

It was nearly midday when I got downstairs.

Bleddyn was already up and had already told everybody about the pact we’d made in the early hours. The conversation fell immediately to pants and shrivelling - but the others’ joking only served to reinforce my sense of our marching towards irrefutable change. The meal we ate before heading off to the beach, I ate like a man condemned.

We parked up a few hundred yards from the sea and trudged over the muddy fields. Unlike the previous afternoon, it was a perfectly predictable Welsh winter’s day - the mist as wet as the rain was thick. We could almost touch the grey.

As soon as we hit the beach, though, the roar of the sea came rushing onto us and, for a while at least, as we were tuning ourselves to its register, we seemed less troubled by the rain. The dip itself was just that; no less but no more either and we got through it pretty quickly. Bledd and I stripped off and, not wanting to hang around too long for the others to admire us in our pants, sprinted full pelt down the beach, screaming as we went. The worst part was the first step into the water but our momentum carried us through and as soon as we got up to about knee height we fell forward and found, to our great surprise, that it was actually

warmer under the water than out of it. We weren't going to hang around though and after recovering from the overwhelming physical oddness - the realisation that we were in the sea - we struggled back onto our feet and fought our way back out, trying to work our thighs through the water quicker than the breaking waves.

The others were waiting for us with cameras and towels. Bledd realised that his glasses had come off in the sea and that he couldn't see all that much - but we were thoroughly elated all the same. We ran around like madmen for a while, giving each other high fives and rejoicing in our near-nakedness and temporary defiance of the elements. When we'd calmed down and were walking side by side to rejoin the group - they were huddled together like sheep by then - he reached his arm around my shoulders.

The pictures Mererid took on her camera show us smiling, full of life. Our bodies seem to glow with the coursing blood. We only felt the cold again when we were hopping around on one leg trying to get our damp legs into our trousers.

After that we repaired pretty sharpish to the little pub overlooking the beach. It had a pool table and beer from a local brewery and we settled into that place too. We spent a wonderful afternoon revelling, seemingly, in the Welshness of things - the rain, the beer and the way the headland on either side of the beach gave itself unassumingly to the sea.