



Axel is Free

Detention (1977-1997)

I fled the scene like an escaped slave and hid in the woods. They didn't take long to find me. I was taken into custody, held until the trial, convicted of manslaughter on the grounds of diminished responsibility then sentenced to be detained at Her Majesty's pleasure. I was twelve years old.

I was deprived of my liberty for the next twenty years – initially in a juvenile detention facility, then at various adult prisons and finally at Leyhill open prison in leafy Gloucestershire. I would have got out much earlier if I'd accepted full responsibility for what had happened. Pretended nobody else played a part. But life's not like that. Nobody is an island. There is no body of water insulating us from unwelcome influence. We roam, continually crossing paths, our existence is fleeting. And we're much, much smaller than even the most insignificant wave-lashed outcrop. Despite thinking the world exists for us, we are, in fact, its tiniest fraction – each one of us a gas atom whizzing around in an enormous vessel containing billions of other aimless beings. We're pinged this way and that by unforeseeable collisions and, if we try to escape, we are deflected back into the melee by the walls of our social confines. That's the truth. But parole boards don't want the truth.

Eventually, on January the 16th 1997, my desire to be free outweighed my need to explain that we are tiny directionless particles of matter constantly impacted by other people's unpredictable lives. My personal officer told me freedom was just a few words away, so I gave that year's parole board what it wanted, what, in fairness, other judicial experts and officials had coached me to say for over a decade;

'I was responsible for everything that happened.'

That admission was the touch paper for my eventual, long-deferred release.

They offered me a new identity. I declined. New identities are for people who want to burrow back into society like grubs into apples. I didn't want to wriggle back into that acrid orb. I'd had enough of society. I planned to live at its extremities – to flit around the orchard like a carefree butterfly while clumsy worms and grubs feasted on rotting fruit. I wanted to be a common blue butterfly, one of those I'd watched dance around prison yards as if the restricted spaces I'd been condemned to were enormous ballrooms.

Then disappear silently over towering walls.

And anyway, new identities are for people who want to redefine themselves. Recreate who they are. Be reborn. It's delusional to think you can become someone entirely different from the child you once were. We are connected to our pasts like the liquid drop at the tip of an icicle. Try and cut yourself off from your frozen foundations and you'll fall to the ground and be destroyed. Evaporate. The most you can do is change how you respond to things – accept your chilled history – but be strong-willed enough *not* to repeat it. For me, that meant avoiding the negative influences of others. Which is why I'd bought a derelict cottage in the Brecon Beacons that I would restore on my own, then live in on my own. As a hermit.

The Brecons – an extract (1921)

Six Titans carved from blood-red stone

By ice that creaked, and shrieked, and moaned

Observe the acts of mortal men

Who strive to know more than they ken;

But vain they try with dark techniques

To glean the wisdom of the peaks.

– *follower of Arthur Machen.*

Cribyn (2,608 feet)

Animals use their bodies for movement, their digestive systems to power that activity and their brains to store information. I cannot move. I have no desire to. Every bit of me is dedicated to storing and processing knowledge – something I have been doing for over three hundred million years.

Brains use nerve cells to store information. Computers utilize semiconductive materials such as silicon. I use red sandstone. Which is 99.95% of me. Although sandstone lacks the organic advantages of grey matter and the electro-communicative benefits of computer technology, it can store considerably more data per unit volume than either of the aforementioned systems. Furthermore, I am immense compared to the largest computer or the human brain. If I was a hollow shell, fifty billion human encephala could be stacked inside me. That's half as many human minds as have ever existed. Which, with the higher capacity of my substance to store data, means I can hold more information than all the humans that are alive, have ever lived and will ever exist.

And I am loaded with data. Knowledge, you see, flows up from the bedrock – much like water flows down into seas, lakes and subterranean reservoirs. Although most modern humans are unaware of this, primitive people knew we mountains are brimming with wisdom. The Neolithics tried to tune into us using megaliths of granite, bluestone and basalt. They placed their ‘huge’ carved stones in the earth and gathered around them, hoping to use their monoliths as mineral stethoscopes that could eavesdrop on the conversations my kin and I conduct through the strata beneath us.

These primitive people would dance around their stone structures, rub them with various materials, coat them with substances, tie objects to them, sacrifice living creatures against them or imbibe narcotics beside them to try and bridge the perception gap between enduring earthly wisdom and fleeting human lucidity. If we mountains could laugh, the ground beneath these fools would have shuddered and erupted as they attempted to access our knowledge. It didn’t matter what ridiculous methods they tried, what elaborate ceremonies they performed, we only share our observations when we want to.

Arriving (1997)

I was blind to the scenery from Leyhill Prison to the estate agent’s premises in Merthyr Tydfil. I’d spent the entire journey mentally rehearsing strategies for keeping others at a distance. I didn’t even look at my feet until I stepped off the final train at Merthyr station.

The woman with my key wasn’t in the office when I arrived, so I strolled a few doors down the street to an unloved café and ordered an all-day breakfast. ‘Full Welsh’ it said on the menu. I dined alone – something I planned to do for the rest of my life. Sitting at a chipped Formica table, people walking past the large café window, it struck me as viscerally as having my head shoved down a toilet that I was no longer incarcerated.

I didn't feel truly free until I was in the centre of the Cwm Farm entrance bay and the raspy purr of the estate agent's Peugeot 205 GTi had faded to nothing. With her and her car gone, it was as if the Brecon Beacons and I were the only things that existed. I was comfortable with that. Mountains are indifferent to human affairs. To them we must be little more than sandflies on pyramids – pattering across their slopes for less than a blink of an eye, if hills had eyes. Although we believe ourselves masters of the planet, they ignore us. That lack of interest provided the anonymity I'd craved since being taken into custody. For the first time in twenty years there was no one watching me, making notes, discussing my progress, judging me. I could do what I wanted. I was my own man. My troubled past and my determination to change were infinitesimally insignificant to the hills that dominated the landscape.

The Brecon Beacons are in South Wales and they form the highest mountain range in southern Britain. To anyone from a *truly* mountainous part of the world, they're little more than undulating terrain. On character-building outdoor pursuits trips (during my later years in detention) I'd seen them seethe with storms powerful enough to rip trees out of the ground, lashed with diagonal rain and buffeted by driving snow. On the morning of my relocation, they were subdued. At first I naïvely imagined all was silent. But naivety, like all forms of innocence, is corrupted by time. My ears slowly tuned into the muted symphony of my adopted surroundings: a gentle wind playing with foliage, the gurgling of a nearby stream, and the occasional baas, barks and caws of hillside animals. The peaks appeared immune to this commotion, so I stood still in attempted solidarity.

Trying to mimic the motionlessness of the mountains was folly. I could feel my chest rising and falling as I sucked in fresh, damp air. I blinked. I had quickly lost my game of statues with the epochal, immovable Brecons.

Defeated, I bent down to collect my swollen 80-litre rucksack. Bulky and heavy, it had remained where I put it on the estate agent's back seat as she raced along the snaking single-track roads to Cwm Farm. It contained my tent, sleeping bag, gas burner, food, first aid kit, cooking utensils, my copy of *The Complete Home Restoration Manual* and some basic building tools. My roll mat was attached to the outside. ('One underneath is worth three on top,' outdoor pursuits instructor Nige had repeated ad nauseam.) I gripped the key to my new home. The estate agent had handed it to me before I got out of her car. En route she'd bombarded me with questions about my past, present and future. There was no way I was going to tell her anything about what I'd done as a boy – that malevolent genie needed to remain in its tarnished lamp. Neither would I explain my plans for the cottage. So I stuck to neutral statements like, 'I'm going to wait and see,' and, 'I haven't decided yet.' I got the impression she was annoyed by my responses but tried to pretend she wasn't. Her mask was wasted on me. I have a knack for seeing through behavioural smoke screens.

I strode to the black, five-bar wooden gate that separated public from private land. It was wide enough to let a tractor through – with a sheepdog running alongside. The stone chippings of Cwm Farm's entrance bay grated beneath my blue, yellow-striped Adidas trainers.

You only get one chance to create a first impression and I wanted the mountains to admire me, so I climbed onto the gate and stood, hands free, on the fourth bar of the gate with my shins pressed against the top. Then stretched my arms out sideways like a crossless Jesus. I was easily able to maintain that pose despite the upper bar digging into the thin flesh covering my shins. My balancing act, with a hefty rucksack on my back, demonstrated both my athleticism and willingness to endure pain. I was a silverback gorilla bashing its chest, a peacock displaying its gaudy tail, a Welsh archer sticking his drawing fingers up at French knights. Few people would dare adopt that position with such a heavy weight on their back. I,

however, had dedicated my time in detention to two things – being fighting fit and reading military history. This I'd topped with three years grafting in skills workshops and on 'community reintegration' building sites. So I was in ready, both physically and technically, to restore Inglenook Cottage to its former glory. And I was tough enough to put up with the challenge of doing it on my own, in the middle of nowhere, through all seasons, whilst initially sleeping alongside all my possessions in a two-man tent.

Before pressing on, I knitted together the panorama before me with knowledge I'd gleaned from hours studying Ordnance Survey Landranger map 160. The potholed farm track ahead contoured the gently sloping foothill fields of Cwm Farm all the way to a freshwater pumping station higher up. Cwm Farm, with its abundance of livestock, dairy and arable outbuildings, was off to the right of the track; Inglenook Cottage was further along and to the left. The sprawling farm complex was unmissable from my farm gate perch. My derelict cottage however was almost hidden by trees and hedgerows. I needed to walk past those obstructions to see it properly, so I clambered over the gate and set off.