

# SMALL FIELD

## ONE: CONTACT

The solicitor told me that I was being unreasonable. He sounded at the end of his tether whilst I felt like I was at the beginning of an adventure without knowing what the adventure was. He had spoken to me after I had taken a call from his office which went something like this:

“Hello. This is Natasha Campbell and I am calling from the office of Frewer and Timpson Solicitors. Am I speaking to Mr Tony Farthing?”

“Yes.”

“Hello, Tony. I am ringing about the estate of Mr Alec Green who I understand was your Great Uncle. Is that correct?”

“Yes”

“Well, Tony, I am ringing to clear up a small detail and your response may make life a great deal simpler for us. Mr Green left very clear instructions as to how his estate should be allocated but at the end of his will he said, “If there is anything left over may it go to my Great Nephew, Tony Farthing.” Although I was mildly irritated by being called Tony, she had my attention now. She sounded very young. I waited for her to continue.

“I’m sorry to say that there is nothing left over except a tiny worthless patch of ground on top of a cliff, with no access except by the coast path and with no electricity or water. It seems it has been ignored in conveyancing for several generations but it has cropped up again.” Her words were doing their best to make it sound dreadful but her tone of voice had an edge of excitement. “We are hoping you have no interest in it so that we can amend the deeds.”

“I would like to visit it,” I said.

“Oh! I so much wanted you to say that,” said Natasha, like a little girl who had got her way. I heard an explosive sound like a pressure cooker, followed by “Tasha, give me that phone!”

After a few seconds, a rather aggressive voice spoke. “I’m sorry, Mr Farthing. My error of judgment. Daniel Frewer, speaking. Senior partner. Natasha is here on work experience and the matter is so inconsequential I decided I would reward her enterprise by letting her ring you. I can assure you there is no merit in this land. It is the proverbial postage stamp, no wider than a track.”

“I would like to visit it,” I repeated.

“You are being unreasonable, Mr Farthing.”

“I would rather be considered unreasonable but have had the chance to visit this inconsequential postage stamp than spend the rest of my life wondering what it looked like.”

“Well, I’m in no position to take you. And the cost to you in legal fees will far outweigh the value of the land.” Mr Frewer sounded exasperated.

A week later, Mr Frewer, Natasha and I were driving into a small car park on the Devon Coast. The surface was potholed and the potholes were full of water after last night’s rain. Mr Frewer flinched each time muddy water splashed the side of his immaculate car. It had taken about six phone calls and two letters from me to reach this arrangement. Apparently, Natasha had said that she wanted to see the plot of land too and had terrified Mr Frewer by suggesting she could go with me. Tasha later told me that he had said, “Good heavens, girl, what would your mother say if she found out I had let you go off to darkest Devon with a strange man!” It seems that Mr Frewer has a very high opinion of Tasha and is likely to offer her a job on the strength of her work experience. He was under such pressure with two major contracts going pear-shaped that the prospect of a day away from the office felt like merciful relief. Or so he had said before we had entered the car park.

We pulled up against a tangled hedge of bramble and hawthorn and set off through a gate at the lower end of the car park. Mr Frewer’s relief was already over. He turned to look back at his car, spattered brown even on the windows. As we pushed our way through overhanging foliage, he said, “I never knew places like this existed.” He looked down at his black shoes, already caked in mud. “Now I know why they say never wear brown shoes with a black suit.” The poor man was so ignorant of the countryside that he was dressed for a conference rather than a walk. Tasha and I had walking boots. As we reached the end of the path, he repeated softly and mournfully, “I never knew...” I found I rather respected the man because he never once suggested going back. The next gate opened out into a green field that sloped towards the sea. The grey sea merged with the grey sky so seamlessly that there was no horizon. Sheep looked at us and then ran away bleating with a lamb chasing after them.

As we descended the field, Mr Frewer told me about Tasha, who was way ahead of us and about to climb a stile. “She has eyes like a hawk. Misses nothing. I gave her the deeds of a huge farming estate to have a look at and she found many typing errors. Literals she calls them. She picked up the word in her previous work experience at a publishers. Apparently, she knocked spots off the

freelance proof-reader and she can have a job there any time she wants. I'm hoping to convince her to work with us instead."

We approached the stile, slithering through mud at the base. Tasha was already following the coast path along the cliffs. As we turned onto the path, Mr Frewer looked ahead. "What! Not all the way up there, surely?"

"Well, you said the location was at the top of a cliff."

"Yes. And it's thanks to Tasha that we're here at all. You may be thankful at least. She scrutinised the maps attached to the deeds and spotted the tiniest discrepancy in the ruling of a boundary line. She spent the whole of her lunch break comparing earlier versions of the maps and found that this small plot had been mis-recorded for over 100 years and been ignored at each sale."

Tasha was waiting for us at the foot of a 120-metre climb. Then she raced up the slope zig-zagging left and right, exploring the bushes on one side and the cliff edge on the other, like an eager dog running ahead of its owners. Near the summit she waited again. Mr Frewer was leading the way ahead of me to my huge surprise. He was unexpectedly fit, the result of regular sessions at his local gym, and even his towney shoes only slightly slowed his progress. As we joined Tasha, a couple of hikers with walking poles came over the brow and stepped into a small alcove in the brambles to let us pass. We must have made a comic trio. We chatted briefly to them; the usual platitudes about steep climbs, chance to rest, and the weather prospects, then we started the next descent.

"Whoa! We must have gone past it. It's supposed to be at the top," yelled Tasha. She put her map in her mouth and grabbed our hands, towing the two of us back the way we had come. "This must be it." The three of us stood in the alcove where the hikers had stood inadvertently concealing our destination. None of us spoke. Even the sea behind our backs was silent, the flat calm gently sliding to the foot of the cliffs. I expected Mr Frewer to sneer and scoff at the mess in front of us, but he was scrutinising it as intently as Tasha and myself.

The plot would have been open to the sea if it hadn't been sealed by brambles, blackthorn and gorse. The two longer sides running at right angles to the cliff looked like neglected hedges or maybe banks, also piled high with many years' growth of brambles and blackthorn, and this dense mat spread over the ground between to hide the plot. The boundary on our right, the east side, had two trees, one an oak, the other a hawthorn bent away from the sea in an arc; the western boundary had a single magnificent tree which I thought was a beech. As if reading my thoughts, Tasha whispered, "No, it's a different type of oak. If it was a beech it

would have blown over in the storms. They have shallow roots. Dad told me.”

Her whispered voice somehow captured how I felt. We were looking at an undeniable mess; a very small, insignificant mess; yet somehow anything but insignificant. The mess extended for about 50 metres before being blocked by some scrubby woodland. I took some photos with my phone and turned to look at the sea. I suppose I had hoped for a turquoise sea with white breakers rolling in, blue sky overhead and warm sunshine illuminating the plot of land. The monotonous grey stillness should have suffocated my reactions to the place but it didn't. The longer I stood there, the more certain I felt that this place was uniquely special. Despire not the day of small things.

The three of us turned to look at each other. Tasha, and to my astonishment Dan Frewer, had intensely bright eyes with a tear running down their cheek. I knew I must look the same. None of us would have been able to explain why and words at that point seemed an intrusion. We set off back to the car, somehow transformed into a team, and Tasha chose to stay close to Dan and myself. As we approached the car, she said, “Did you see it?”

“Yes,” answered Dan and I simultaneously.

As soon as Dan drove lurching and bouncing out of the car park and onto the tarmacked lane, the bubble burst and we all started gabbling. Dan cut through the noise eventually, and said, “Leave it with me, Tony. I will make sure that the loose ends are tied up and the revised deeds sent to you as soon as possible.” Tasha stifled a gasp, hearing a new side of Dan.

## **TWO: PLANNING**

I waited for three weeks before contacting Dan's office to check on progress but Dan was out and no-one else knew anything about the conveyancing. Tasha had gone back to school and Dan's personal assistant had found the file was empty when I asked her to check. I found that mildly encouraging because it suggested that Dan had the papers and was dealing with it personally. I used the intervening time to do some research of my own. When I had looked at the property maps that Dan had sent me, I noticed that the old versions had outlined the adjoining properties and left a thin gap near the coast where you would have expected them to share a boundary. I thought this was just carelessness until I went on line to look at the old 6” to the mile Ordnance Survey maps. The 1890 edition showed a lane or a track running between the two adjoining fields towards the coast. The line of the track ran straight

through my plot. Historically the land didn't seem to belong to either farm. Was it an old road?

Devon has over 8000 miles of roads, many of them unbelievably narrow lanes. Some years ago, I drove a friend from California around Devon to give him a taste of the countryside. He sat in the front passenger seat and hugged his seat when we turned into a single-track lane. When that lane narrowed to brush the sides of the car and then developed a line of grass down the middle, he had visions of being wedged between the banks.

Over the years some lanes became abandoned, others were still legally roads but impassable. I had seen more than one rough track deeply rutted with a modern road sign pointing down it, reading Unmetalled Road. In addition to the road network there are miles and miles of 'green lanes'. On the road map they are like a second web and it is often difficult to work out which are public roads and which are private. Some of the green lanes I have walked looked like through-routes connecting hamlets and farms but which have been superseded by more modern routes, or the original need had gone. Like many of the lanes in Devon, most of the green lanes are deeply scoured out of the land and run like tunnels under banks topped with over-arching trees. I had sometimes wondered why the landowners of the day had made it such a priority to dig deep and why they seemed to take the direct line regardless of hills.

I recently had walked on the edge of Dartmoor and my route descended steeply to an old farm and chapel where a small tarmacked lane touched the track at a corner. I had a choice of routes and selected what turned out to be a green lane paved with native rock and which took a more or less straight line up a very steep hill and descended equally steeply to re-join the lane. Half-way up I looked at the map and found out why the tarmacked lane curved in an almost perfect semi-circle around the base of the hill: I had failed to notice the tightly packed contours of the hill. The green lane was clearly hardly used by locals as my progress was hampered by fallen trees. None of this helped define what might be the background to my plot but it did raise my hopes that somehow access might be re-established from the land-ward side.

Access to Small Field, as I had named it, could be my greatest problem. If all I planned to do was to clear the scrub, I could probably carry a brush-cutter and a can of petrol up the coast path. But I was already having fanciful dreams of creating a tiny personal place of solitude and rest. And if I was going to clear bramble, gorse, bracken, blackthorn, honeysuckle and ivy, how would I dispose of it? Some of the tangled mat was over 4 metres tall and even the bracken was over head height. I couldn't have

bonfires without seriously damaging the precious trees. Would the adjoining landowners give me access over their boundaries? Somehow, I didn't relish involving large corporate landowners. I even weighed up the possibility of chucking it all over the cliff and letting the tides sweep it away but I couldn't quiet my conscience over that.

I checked the site on Google maps, zooming in on the aerial view. Was that smudge between the trees a track to Small Field from the road? There was little to help. Despite silence from Dan, I drove to have a look. There were two other cars already in the car park and it felt strange to set off from the car park on my own. The sun was shining, the ground had dried out considerably, there was a breeze coming off the sea and, as soon as I entered the field, I heard the sound of breaking waves. It is one of the best sounds in the world. The coast path was empty as I approached 'my' land and I was glad of the solitude. The sea made the only sound until a chiff chaff chiff-chaffed from my largest oak and the distant drilling of a woodpecker came intermittently.

Suddenly the magic of the place came back like a gentle breeze. All the way up the hill I had been beating myself up: had Dan's initial assessment of me been spot on because I truly was unreasonable? was I wasting time and money in a hopeless delusion? the place was indeed no more than an overgrown track; the two neighbouring landowners will oppose everything I do; and anyway how long will the land even last with the rate of cliff erosion around the coast? The last question was not unreasonable. In the five years since I walked the whole South West Coast Path, cliff falls have forced the re-routing of the path away from the sea in Cornwall, Devon, Dorset and Somerset. Yet my doubts somehow felt disloyal, though to what or whom I had no idea.

Standing silently in the alcove where I had stood with Dan and Tasha, I felt in awe. How could this tiny, tiny patch, this scruffy, scruffy patch affect me like this. It was as if I was on holy ground. I wasn't alone. Someone was standing with me. It wasn't scary or spooky; it was just good. That's all I can say. I stood there for maybe half an hour and it was as if I had x-ray eyes and could see the real shape of the land under the vegetation, could see the real size of the plot and, above all, see what it would become. Then the presence left me and I went back to the car park, desperately trying to seal in my memory everything I had 'seen'.

When I got back home, my answerphone was flashing. "Hi Tony. Dan here. Sorry I've not been in touch. I was hanging on till I had some concrete news for you. Not looking great so far. Don't give up. I'll be in touch." I felt sick. Reason said the balloon was

up. I sat down and closed my eyes and at once a video of all that I had seen and felt ran past and it was more real than Dan's message.

The following week I drove back again; not to the same car park but to the lane that ran behind my plot. It was narrow and without any laybys or verges but I squeezed into a gateway and hoped I wasn't blocking a farm vehicle. Up ahead the lane turned a sharp corner and in the corner, tucked amongst drooping foliage, was a sign: Unmetalled road. I felt my knees wobble. The 'road' didn't even justify the title of track but it led through a narrow band of neglected woodland and I knew it led to my land. If this was still legally a road, however ludicrous it might seem, it had the potential to give me access. I pulled a few fallen branches to one side and pushed through into the trees. In true Devonian style the 'road' had been carved into the land, creating high banks where I entered. Inevitably water running off the land had channelled into the track and washed out a deep watercourse. Elsewhere muddy puddles lay in hollows. I was glad of my wellies. The track rose briefly and culminated at a dense blockade of brambles, gorse and the rest of the invasive plants that filled my land. If I could clear the ground; if I could fill the ruts and direct the water away, I would have a way in with a vehicle and that would save me having to hump loads up the cliff path. If.

I had with me the 1:25000 scale OS map of the area. The key to symbols at the bottom doesn't identify Unmetalled Roads; the thin white roads represent 'other road, drive or track' and lots of them end at a house or farm whilst others finish at a field gate. What intrigued me was that some that led nowhere except into a field then continued for a distance as a single dashed line, a path but not a public footpath. That is what the map showed here: an 'other road, drive or track' through the wood, that continued through my land as a path that was not a public right of way. I wasn't sure what that signified for me except that I was pleased it wasn't a right of way.

When I got home, Dan's car was parked outside and he was just getting out of the car. "Perfect timing, Tony. How about that?" We went inside together. My heart was pounding. I forced myself to make coffees and wait for Dan to open up. "I hoped you would be here, Tony, because I wanted to deliver this in person". He kept hold of an A4 envelope without passing it to me. "You are now the proud owner of a heap of tangled stuff. The delay was getting one of the parties to agree that the eastern bank and hedge was within your property. It increases the width of your plot and protects that magnificent tree." Dan's eyes twinkled as he handed over the envelope. "And what lies under it?" "The tiny barn!" I breathed.

That was what all three of us had spotted on our first visit, almost completely hidden under greenery.

## THREE: GROUNDWORK

I told Dan that I would go to the plot on Saturday and start clearing undergrowth. In anticipation of eventually creating a grassy clearing, I formally called it Small Field. The forecast for Saturday was for cloudy but largely dry weather. I toiled up the cliff path carrying brush cutter, petrol and a backpack, pondering on the enormity of the task ahead of me. At the top, I put everything down in the alcove and that magical spiritual feeling came again. Even a burst of rain driven by winds from the south-west couldn't completely wash it away. I started cutting on the west side of Small Field where I was partly sheltered by the undergrowth and bank. After about 30 minutes I had cleared a tiny patch and started a pile of cuttings. The rain showed no signs of easing, and dealing with wet foliage made it worse. I continued to work for another hour or so, long enough to create the beginnings of a path. Then I packed it in. I sat in the car and ate my lunch, feeling discouraged.

Over the next few weeks I forced myself to clear more ground. Each time when I left home the enormity of the task sat heavily on my shoulders and each time I arrived it lifted and was replaced with anticipation, even joy. It didn't speed the clearing process but it made a big difference to me. Progress was slowed by the number of walkers who stopped to chat, all asking the same questions: what are you doing? Why don't you get a tractor in here? What are you going to use this small patch for? Are you going to build a house here?

One Saturday, a shadow fell across the ground in front of me and I saw a pair of rather posh-looking boots. I straightened up slowly and stiffly. It was only when I saw the smiling face that I recognised Dan. He was dressed like a cross between a lumberjack and a squire, in a checked shirt, corduroy trousers, sleeveless bodywarmer and a baseball cap. He was carrying a brush cutter, a can of petrol, two folding chairs and a backpack which he dropped on my toes. I was speechless. "Aren't you going to invite me in, Tony? I've brought lunch."

He pushed past me and flung everything on the ground, set up a chair and collapsed, sweating and puffing. "How did you manage all that up the cliff?" I asked.

"Brute strength and ignorance. I counted my steps and stopped to change hands every 100 or so."

"But what brought you here, Dan?"



“Not what, who. Cheryl sent me. In fact, she commanded me. She said I hadn’t talked about anything else for weeks on end and she was tired of it. She reckoned that a day’s hard labour to achieve not much would cure me.”

I pulled the second chair out of its bag and enjoyed the luxury of sitting in it. It made a change from negotiating trimmings of gorse and nettles. We nattered a bit and then Dan produced two pasties and two bottles of beer. He panicked a bit when he couldn’t find his bottle opener but happily found it in a side pocket of his backpack. “Disaster averted. I’ve seen men pull off the tops with their teeth but I don’t fancy the dentist’s bills.” He handed me an opened bottle and a pasty. “I bought them in Bristol before I set out so I’m amazed they are still warm. The M5 was appalling. I meant to be here by 11.”

I can’t recall a happier meal. It was so companionable. The pasties were great and so was the beer. Despite our different backgrounds we shared opinions and Dan was in an expansive mood. The sun even broke through and the warmth made me sleepy. “To work,” I shouted with more resolve than I felt. For the next two hours the air buzzed and zipped with the stereo noise of two brush cutters. I was further amazed when Dan pulled ear defenders, goggles and gauntlets from his backpack. We achieved more than double my own efforts, partly because my motivation and energy responded to teamwork, but partly because we had few interruptions from passers on the path. The increased noise discouraged some, and those who still felt it necessary to shout questions at us were dealt with by Dan, who grunted monosyllabic answers and then turned his back.

When we stopped in mid-afternoon, we shared my flask of tea and biscuits. Dan looked proudly at his boots. “Good. They’re properly broken in. I hate to be the new boy. It was the same at school. To the despair of parents, it was a point of honour to scuff new shoes, fray cuffs and burn a hole in blazers as soon as our first year started. It was partly self-preservation so we didn’t get picked on by the second-years.” Dan’s boots, like mine, were coated with fragments of wood, stems and leaves, and the leather scratched and scuffed. One deep cut revealed shiny metal. “Steel toe-caps. I so nearly declined them in the store. It took me a while to get used to the balance of the brush cutter and I could have lost a toe or two.”

“I’m thinking of putting in another stint, Dan, but you’ve got a longer drive ahead of you. You need to knock off. Thanks for all you’ve done.” “Not so, brother. I’m here for the duration and anyway Cheryl is expecting me home properly exhausted.”

We both looked behind us at the heap of cuttings that we had piled. Dan raised his eyebrows to form the question that I had

been asking myself for a long time. How was I going to shift and dispose of it all? The area was too small to have a bonfire. The overhanging trees would suffer and maybe even catch fire; the hedges likewise were vulnerable. The heat would be intense and I wasn't sure what that would do to the soil. "There'll be a way," I said.

Dan eased himself out of his chair with a bit of a wince. He'd gone at the task of clearing ground like a bull at a gate through his desire to help and through inexperience. "Always a mistake to stop," he said. "Onwards and upwards!"

We worked for about another hour, maybe more, and the light was fading fast. In the cool air the sweat on our backs felt cold. We started to pack up but Dan suggested a rest before we struggled down the cliff path with our respective loads. Whilst we sat, surveying our progress, Dan pulled out a food container from his backpack. "Cake!" I was going to offer this for lunch but thought we would struggle to stay awake. Cheryl would be decidedly dischuffed if I took any home. She made it herself." We ate the excellent cake, telling ourselves it would fuel us for our descent to the car park. Whilst we ate and rested, we talked about the next step. I said, "Before I clear much more, I'm going to have to solve the problem of disposal. But what I would really like, Dan, is to clear around the barn. The growth is massive around it and I'd love to have a chance to look at the stonework. I figure it is going to be important to fit a secure door once the vegetation is cleared to protect the barn from campers or vandals." Dan looked over his shoulder at the wood behind Small Field. "I think, Tony, before you can entertain anything like structural plans you are going to have to solve your access problems." It wasn't something that I wanted to hear.

Dan and I hobbled down to our cars. Talk about the barn had opened up the possibility of creating secure storage for equipment so that we didn't have to carry it to the site on each visit. Then I caught myself. I was thinking 'we'. Was I already assuming Dan's further involvement?

## **FOUR: TEAMWORK**

I have got used to doing things on my own and with that came a habit of expecting things to be done my way. Dan's comments about access had irritated me and had dominated my thinking on my drive home. It wasn't until I had slept on it that I got to the place of recognising his wisdom and I didn't return to Small Field for three weeks because of other commitments. I took my equipment as usual although I was mainly planning to re-assess

possibilities. Despite the challenges and seemingly unsurmountable barriers, I was thrilled when the same positive energy seemed to flood into me when I stood in Small Field. What is the source of this spirituality? I wondered. You can't have a Holy Well on top of a hill; apart from the small barn there is no building within a mile or so.

I spent all morning shuffling around the limited space, thinking, and I spent a bit of time trying to move the loose material around the bottom of the pile to the top. It was then that I heard the sound of a tractor beyond the hedge getting closer and soon a man looked down on me from the seat of an aged tractor. "Good morning," he called. "I'm glad to see you're tidying up that track. I had my eye on it myself when I heard there was disputed ownership but I heard that old Alec had left it to someone in the family. Didn't expect anyone to take it up to be honest."

"I'm sorry if I took it from you," I said.

"Don't you worry about that. Old Alec be smiling in his grave to know one tiny bit of his farm was still in family hands. All the rest was sold on by executors to a corporate company." The man turned off his engine and conversation became easier, even through a narrow gap in the hedge.

"Alec Green was my Great Uncle. I'm Tony. I never knew him, sadly."

"Oh! I knew him. Greatest rascal in these farms when it came to paying bills but the wisest and kindest man you could hope to meet. He knew every field, hedge and wood round here like he knew his own hands. He preserved the land, cared for the soil before organic was invented. I worked for him for years before he fell ill and he had to quit farming altogether. 'Tis often said but tis true that's what finished him off. He knew none of his sons and daughters would carry it on. Three hundred years of farming in the one family. How's that for continuity? Like I said, I worked for him. 'Tis ironic really. The executors got rid of me but the neighbouring farm was taken over by a big company at the same time and the manager took me on. He's an accountant not a farmer, so he needs my knowledge. He gets it cheap. I like him though because he's humble enough to admit what he don't know."

"What is your name," I asked when he drew breath. "'Tis Bill, Bill Shere. I can see you have a problem."

"Yes, several actually. But if you are working for a modern corporate farm, what are you doing on such an old tractor, and so small too?"

"Beryl? Old Beryl is part of me, she is. She's my legs now they're playing me up. She's so faithful, she never packs up. Been going since I bought her in the nineteen sixties."

“But I thought modern farming used huge machinery and brought in contractors. Some of them can barely get down the lanes without ripping out the banks,” I said.

“Ah! And you’ve hit on why Beryl still has her uses. I can drive her into places on the farm no-one else can reach. They’ve begun tearing out hedges and felling trees to make the fields economic for the big stuff. Had to stop because this is an AONB and the authorities slapped an injunction on them. Excuse me asking. I don’t like nosy people myself. What plans have you got for this place?”

“Well, I don’t really know and can’t do much with the limited access I’ve got. I’ve had to carry everything up the coast path and back down each time I come. And I don’t even know how to get rid of all the cuttings. I want to keep the trees and maybe open up the space between the hedges to a sort of grassy glade.”

“Keeping the trees. Now we’re talking the same language. I had heard they was going to fell that big old oak until you came along. I believe I can help you though. This field I’m in with old Beryl here, this field is too small as it stands for them to farm so it stands fallow. If you was to cut back a section of the hedge, it needs layering anyway, if you was to cut it back you could throw your trimmings over here and it would rot down long before they was to decide to use it. Call it green manure if you like.”

“That’s amazing. Thank you. Why would you bother?”

“Like I said. Alec was the wisest and kindest man. He taught me and he helped me out of a big hole once. I owe it to him. There’s one more thing. Your access.”

“Yes, I can’t see a solution. I’ve looked at the map and explored some historical stuff but I’m stuck The Unmetalled Road isn’t necessarily a right of way through what is a private wood. And anyway, I’m concerned that if I open up a way to my patch it will become a well-trodden access to the coast path.”

“I could see your problem when I saw you and your friend labouring like pack horses on the path. Tis surprising what you can see over the hedges from the seat of a tractor!” I laughed. Bill continued, “The wood is neglected. Hasn’t been coppiced for decades. It belongs to this estate but it’s too small to interest them. If you were to fill in the ruts to make it passable you could drive stuff up to your boundary and no-one is the wiser. Just don’t make it too tidy.”

I was left standing open mouthed as Bill started up Beryl and drove off. He waved as he turned back the way he had come. I marvelled that his sixty-year-old banger started first time and moved off relatively quietly. The only dubious thing was the exhaust that pumped stuff up to the sky but even that seemed to

disappear as he crossed the field. I could not really fathom all this. I had started out working slowly on my own, achieving less than I had hoped and had encountered barrier after barrier. I had had help and friendship from Dan and now from Bill, who in a single conversation with a stranger had solved my problems. For the first time I wondered if this was connected in some way with the good feelings I had experienced in Small Field. I couldn't wait to tell Dan, but Dan was on holiday.

I set out a plan of campaign. First, to cut back the hedge on the eastern side, the hedge through which I had spoken to Bill. Second, I needed to learn how to layer a hedge using traditional methods. Third, I needed to shift our backlog of trimmings into the next field. Probably improving the access through the wood should have taken precedence but I hadn't yet cleared a way through Small Field to the boundary with the wood. So, when I next reached Small Field I attacked the eastern hedge near the pile of cuttings. I was in the process of working against brambles as thick as my wrist when Dan arrived. It seemed to me that Dan loved the unexpected, the impromptu. Maybe it was a necessary rebellion against the constraints of the legal processes. Anyway, as Dan approached, he said, "Hi Tony. I'd like you to meet Cheryl." Then Dan stepped to one side and, with a grin across the full width of his face, he added, "You already know my daughter, Tasha."

"Explanations needed, Dan!" I called as I stumbled to disentangle myself. Cheryl and I shook hands rather formally and I felt we were both slightly wary of each other. Tasha, however, had no such inhibitions and gave me a big hug. "Tasha, Dan?" I burbled. "How can this be? When we first spoke, Tasha, you said your name was Campbell, unless I've got it wrong."

"Tasha is my step-daughter but no less my daughter. Cheryl is here because my last visit had the opposite effect to what she hoped. I've been talking even more about the magical feeling up here and when Tash joined in and said, "It's all true, Mum," Cheryl decided the only way was to come and see for herself."

"Yes, but look at you all!" I shouted.

"Behold, your work force," said Dan. "We have come to labour, not get in the way. Cheryl has years of experience of fighting nature in our paddock. Tash is captain of her rugby team. They are both toughies."

We set our chairs near the coast path to deter intruders and interruptions, and planned how to divide the work whilst we sampled more of Cheryl's cake and necessary drinks. I only told them I had permission to dump stuff over the hedge and left it at that. There wasn't a lot of space for four workers but Dan's

description of the work in progress had given Cheryl a clear idea of how she could contribute. She brought with her the most lethal looking pitchfork and was ready to clear trimmings. She and Tash sat and absorbed the atmosphere of the place whilst Dan and I completed the task of making a window through the eastern hedge. I had already made good progress and as soon as Cheryl saw the gap she leapt into action. Tash assisted with a garden fork. I glanced across at Cheryl's face which was transformed into a smiling, excited expression. It may have been partly the satisfaction of getting involved in the work but I reckoned it was Small Field working its magic. Tash was glowing too. They made an amazing team, aware of each other's movements and need for space, and despite the enormity of the heap I could see it beginning to shrink. The energy and strength they put into it was amazing and yet they had time to laugh too.

I hadn't told them about my encounter with Bill because I wanted us to get stuck in. When Dan and I paused from brushcutting, the four of us agreed on a rest. "Did you have a good holiday?" I asked.

"Yes," started Dan.

"No," interjected Cheryl.

"Go on then Cheryl, tell him," sighed Dan.

Cheryl looked up at the sky and said, "We were supposed to be in Turkey to get away from work, from home, from commitments but Dan was so wrapped up in this place he kept harking back to it. I confess, Tony, I was more than ready to have a go at you."

"Not with that pitchfork, I hope." I was only half joking. The new Cheryl laughed but I had glimpsed enough of her on their arrival to see she would have been a powerful adversary.

"So what's the position here?" asked Tasha. "Any developments?"

"Yes, indeed yes!" I shouted and then looked round embarrassed in case there had been walkers within earshot. "You won't believe this: main problems all solved thanks to an amazing farmer called Bill." As I unravelled my news, I savoured three unbelieving faces chiming in with, "No way!" "Awesome," "You're joking, mate." "Is this legit?" "Wow!" "Unbelievable." "I've got to meet Bill."

We resumed work with Tasha keen to have a go at brushcutting. Dan instructed her whilst I took over working alongside Cheryl. I couldn't match her progress with Tasha but we did ok. "I think we need a bit of a change of focus after lunch," I said. "I reckon it's time to clear a way to the barn door."

Lunch went on longer than intended and it was clear we just enjoyed being together. I saw Tasha look over towards the barn and I stood up. "I'm going to get on." The others joined me. Dan and I stood admiring the harmonised working of Cheryl and Tasha until Cheryl turned to us and called out, "Oi, you two. This is not a spectator sport!"

Then we hurried to our task, suitably chastised. The cutting of a path to the barn door took very little time but the clearing of ivy, bramble, honeysuckle and some kind of willow from the door and surrounding stone-work was more of a trial, requiring a saw. We were delighted to see how little of it was growing out of the stonework and, once we had a clear view, we were amazed at the soundness of the door. In our naivety we expected to be able to open the door. It was either locked or swollen. We tried shoulder-charging it, each taking turns but nothing moved. The only result was a painful shoulder for each of us. Maybe it opened outwards.

"Tragedy," said Dan. I kept up a positive expression but my level of disappointment surprised me. I went and sat down, watching Dan kicking twigs and the two workhorses sending forkfuls airborne over the hedge. In an effort of will I resumed cutting down clumps of bracken and, some time later, Dan's brushcutter echoed mine.

The four of us carried on working until cuppa time. Before we could sit down, rain swept in from the south-west. It was the sort that fills pockets, runs up sleeves and makes everything soggy. The last time I had experienced rain like it I had been on exposed cliffs near Branscombe and when I had got back to my car, I was so drenched I had to take off my trousers and drive home bare-legged. The memory of it made me smile because at the time I had waited until no-one was in sight and yet two ladies appeared from nowhere and came to their car next to mine. If they had noticed me, they were the essence of discretion.

None of us felt like braving out the weather so we packed up and walked down the path. At least our backs were to the wind and rain. I turned to look westwards and saw a band of blue in the distance mocking us as if to say, "You should have waited." At the car park I thanked all of them and drove off.

## **FIVE: BILL'S STORY**

After the disappointment of the barn door, I felt I needed to go back to Small Field sooner rather than later, like the proverbial remounting of a horse after a fall. I drove back the following morning, very early, as steam rose from the wet foliage in the sun. It was especially beautiful with the bright light casting long

shadows. I dumped my kit on the ground and poured a coffee from my flask. As I cautiously sipped, I heard the unmistakable sound of Bill's tractor and he came to a stop on the other side of the lowered hedge. We waved to each other and I walked over to the hedge. "Hi Bill, you're about early."

"Never knew a farmer who wasn't," replied Bill. "To be honest I wasn't thinking you'd be here at this time either. Best time of the day. But I kind of felt a nudge to come. I saw you and your three friends yesterday. Saw you at the barn door. I didn't want to talk to a crowd like, but I have a story to tell you, Tony."

"What's it about, Bill?"

"That there barn. 'Tis only a local legend like, but my Gran told me and she would tolerate no nonsense. So if she told me, I reckon there's some truth behind it. Goes back to sixteen something. It was the days when the Dissenters had broken from the Church of England and they were persecuted something rotten. They couldn't afford to be caught worshipping but they were so committed to their ways that they wouldn't give up neither. Up in the north of the county I'm told there is a chapel built right on the border of Devon and Somerset and where three different parishes touched, each having separate authorities. The believers went inside leaving a watchman on the lookout. If a gang was spotted coming to arrest them, the watchman warned those inside and everyone hopped it over the boundary where the authority wasn't valid. Safe till the next time.

"Anyway, my Granny, Violet, she said there was a small Dissenters group around here and they had no safe place to run to. So, they decided to make sure they could never be tracked down in the first place. They decided they couldn't build a chapel; in fact, they couldn't build anything because it would be noticed. So, they searched the fields and woods and after a time they pushed through a small wood and they found a little barn. As it happened, it belonged to a man who wasn't in their group but they heard he was sympathetic to their cause. So they risked approaching him and he said they could use it so long as they did nothing to it to make it look religious, so he wouldn't get arrested along with them. He gave them a key and they cleared it out. It was only small, very small, and they put nothing in, no seats, no cross, no altar, nothing. Not even windows. They came at night and left before daylight. Granny Violet said they stood all the time and took their Bibles with them and maybe their songbooks if they had any. Which I doubt. The only light was the candles they brought with them and took away. There was nothing left. It always looked like an empty barn even if some nosy parker looked inside. They never locked it up because there was nothing to hide.



“According to them stories passed down, these people had amazing faith though they were maybe simple folk. They say one of them collapsed after toiling up the cliff path and died in the doorway. So the rest just gathered round his body and prayed and he stood up, joined in the meeting and walked back home. Tis also said that one night someone was walking up the cliff path. Maybe he was a smuggler up to no good but he saw somebody leaving the barn and he told it round the village. Next time there was a service, there was a gang waiting and they killed the first one to arrive. They didn’t know that each member arrived on their own so the others were able to retreat without getting caught. I’m not religious but I have heard tell that God comes where that murder took place. All I know is it always feels good when I have come near that barn and my knees feel stronger after I’ve been, at least for a while.”

“Wow! And obviously you are talking about this barn,” I said.

“Oh yes. Couldn’t be no other. To make sure he was cleared of recriminations, the farmer locked the door and threw away the key.” Bill paused. “This key.” Bill held up a large iron key.

“How did you know? Have you tried it in the lock? Where did you find it?”

“Last question first. I picked it up in this field. It was just lying in the grass. Second question, yes I tried it. The lock was very stiff but it turned eventually. Bit of oil helped. That’s how I knew. But I couldn’t bring myself to open the door. I’m a bit superstitious like and I thought maybe there is a ghost waiting in there.”

“O come on Bill. We’ve got to open it. Let me have the key and I’ll do it. There’s no evil up here. It always feels lovely.”

“I’ll throw the key over to you but I’m staying here with my Beryl.” Bill lobbed the key over the hedge. I caught it. It was very heavy.” Then I ran over to the barn. I turned to look back at Bill. Beryl’s engine was running and I laughed. The key turned and I shoved the door. It took several shoves but it opened. I stepped into the barn and fell flat on my face in a pool of bright light. I couldn’t get up because a heavy weight was pressing down on me. A different kind of laughter rose up from my stomach and then I fell asleep. When I woke up, Bill had gone and dusk was falling. I knew nothing except I had met with God. Back at my car, I realised I hadn’t locked the barn but I couldn’t face climbing back up.

## **SIX: CURIOSITY**

A few days later, Dan rang me. “When are you next going to Small Field? I’ve got the bug. Believe it or not, so has Cheryl. She says she wants to live there even if it’s in a tent. That’s coming from

someone who hates camping, adores our home, can't bear to be separated from her two horses and who has always maintained that Bristol is the western outpost of civilisation."

"Next Sunday," I answered

"Great. We'll be there by 10.30. Ish." Dan rang off before I could respond. I wasn't really sure that I wanted anyone else there at present. My experience was still so real and so precious that I was scared it might be spoilt. I had already decided that I wouldn't tell anyone about my experience, not even Dan. Let them find out for themselves if God turns up again.

I had spent my spare time checking things out online. I hadn't got a Bible and figured I wouldn't understand it anyway. The only time I'd been to church was at a couple of weddings and a growing list of funerals, but I remembered the word 'gospel'. So I typed in 'gospel' and got swamped with four gospels in the Bible, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. I plumped for Matthew because I liked the name and because it came first. I got confused as I read the stories of Jesus healing so many people, because sometimes he said don't tell anyone but one man was told to go home and tell them what God had done for him. I don't concentrate well when I read online so I ordered a Bible and it arrived the next day. I was attracted to Jesus, so I read the four gospels in two days and then started on the Acts of the Apostles. None of it fitted what I had seen inside churches so I figured Bill's dissenters were onto something special.

On the Sunday, Dan was already there when I staggered up the path. He pointed to the end of Small Field where it joined the wood. I heard Bill's tractor before I saw it. He must have driven through the wood and flattened the barrier of under-growth. Beryl's engine was running but Bill was nowhere to be seen. I dropped all my stuff next to Dan's and we ran towards the tractor. Dan noticed the open door of the barn. "He must be in there," he yelled and changed direction. Before I could warn him, Dan was flat on his face on the floor of the barn, collapsed over Bill's legs. It was the funniest of sights. I knew if I tried to help I would be on the floor with them. So I forced my way through to Beryl and turned off her ignition. Everything felt hilarious: me thinking of the tractor as a she; Dan finding out for himself; Bill daring to open the door; Cheryl not being there; me not having to tell Dan. I pulled my chair out of its bag, unfolded it, sat down, toppled over and lay on the ground laughing like a drunkard. And that is where Bill found me after he had wriggled out from under Dan's inert body.

I pulled out Dan's chair and set it up for Bill. We sat there in silence not feeling the need to talk. Then Bill said, "Curiosity got the better of me, Tony. I was right you know."

“What about, Bill?”

“The ghost. There is a ghost in there but it is a friendly type. Is that what they mean by the Holy Ghost?” With all the accumulated knowledge of six days’ reading I told him what I knew about the Holy Ghost or the Holy Spirit as some call him. Dan arrived and I gave up my chair for him. I started to explain again but I couldn’t get the words out. In fact, all three of us became incoherent as the presence of God moved among us.

Then Bill said, “I need to get back home. Lunch will be ready and the wife will be worried.”

“Lunch!” I shouted. “It’s nearly four o’clock.”

“O blimey. I’m in trouble. Help me get the trailer unloaded. It’s full of hardcore for the ruts.”

“Where did that come from?” Dan asked.

Bill said, “The boss has had a couple of barns demolished. They have used most of it to fill gateways but this was left over. They didn’t know where to dump it, so I piped up and told them there were some ruts I knew could do with filling. And here we are.”

The three of us put on gloves and climbed into the trailer, chucking out stones into the ruts. Then Bill climbed into his seat and started up Beryl. With great skill he reversed a few feet with Dan and I clinging on as we bounced in the trailer. We threw more stones down and Bill reversed again. He repeated the process until we got to the lane. “Throw the last bits over that side,” shouted Bill, pointing to the right. “It’ll come in handy for parking if need be. Then see me out into the lane will you, Tony?”

As Bill drove off, he waved. “I’ll see you sometime, if I live! She probably’s got a search party organised!”

Dan and I returned to the chairs. All Dan said was, “Cheryl sends her apologies. She double booked.”

“She needs to come soon,” I said. “And Tasha.”

“Tasha’s away touring with her team,” answered Dan.

We put all our equipment into the barn and locked it. It felt marvellous to walk downhill empty-handed with just our backpacks, knowing we would never have to struggle up again.

## **SEVEN: LONG HAUL**

Back home I compared recent photographs of Small Field with those that I had taken on my first visit with Dan and Tasha. I was encouraged by the changes. We had virtually cleared the whole site but the hedges needed managing and I hadn’t yet taken any instruction on laying them. The ground we had first cleared was already showing signs of regeneration and that was both good and

bad. The good was that, having exposed the ground to light, spring flowers were beginning to show; primroses and celandines nearer the cliff path, wood anemones and violets towards the wood. I had even spotted a solitary early purple orchid opening early, an early early one. The bad was that brambles were beginning to shoot and furred bracken fronds were making ready to reclaim their territory. It was only the beginning of March and the rate of growth was going to accelerate. Weed killer was not an option and regular brushcutting would only be possible after the flowering season and the release of seeds. I didn't have an answer apart from increasing the frequency of my visits, or our visits, and digging individual roots up. That promised to be a long haul, maybe years of attention.

Bill rang. We had exchanged phone numbers and Bill was quick to assure me he had survived returning home so very late. His wife, Mavis, had not called out the emergency services and had been sitting serenely at the kitchen table when Bill entered. She told Bill that she had had an amazing experience whilst he'd been gone and was sure that God had been telling her that Bill was OK. What worried her more was how Bill would react when he found out she hadn't cooked any lunch. Bill was so relieved at her attitude that he set about making sandwiches for both of them. I had just an inkling of how much grace that took because Sunday Roast was almost a sacrament for them.

Because of the need to keep invasive growth under control I started visiting Small Field several times each week. Dan and Cheryl also came more frequently and we did a lot of digging. The three of us were busy when a voice made us all straighten up.

"My Bill said you were here." A rather stout, oldish lady stood breathing heavily and leaning equally heavily on two sticks. She looked as if she could keel over any minute and I ran towards her scooping up a chair as I passed. "I don't need no chair," she said. "I've come because Bill said God is here and I'm expecting to be rid of all this arthritis. Not that Bill would bring me. He said he was late for work already and I'd have to wait till tomorrow. 'Tomorrow?' I said. 'I might be dead tomorrow. And anyhow you might not be here then.' What I want is to go into your barn. Bill's told me. No. I don't want your arm. If I can toil up the cliff path, I can manage a few steps more."

"You don't mean you have walked all the way here?" cried Cheryl. "That's appalling. I'm going to have words with Bill. He's been so helpful here, yet he won't help his own wife! Unbelievable."

"No you don't. He knows me, does Bill. He knows I was brought up the hard way and I don't need no help from any man.

Or woman. If it's God it's different. He calls me stubborn. I call it independent.”

I walked over to the barn and cleared tools out of Mavis' way. Mavis shuffled in tiny steps towards it and I wondered how many hours and how much pain she had endured walking uphill. Mavis looked over at Cheryl and made a few last steps with her sticks. Like a tornado coming out of the door, a wind blew the sticks out of her hands and she fell flat on her face into the barn, narrowly missing a scythe, and with her legs sticking out of the door. We heard her crying but had to leave her alone when we realised she was crying with joy. She stood up unaided and walked around Small Field like someone trying on a new pair of shoes. Then she looked at the three of us and grinned. “I haven't walked like that for maybe thirty years. Mother said I was bitter and twisted. Well maybe she was right and maybe I was bitter but I'm telling you now, it's not just my legs and hips that are mended; it's my heart. That God of yours, he's done it. And I know his name. 'Tis Jesus. He told me in there and he told me he had visited me when Bill was late. 'Tis beautiful.”

Without stopping any longer, Mavis walked freely to the coast path and turned homewards. She was in good voice. We heard her shout, “Don't need them sticks. You can burn 'em as far as I'm concerned.”

I retrieved the chair that I had offered Mavis and the three of us sat together talking about Mavis and her astounding determination to get up to the clifftop and about what had happened to her. It was odd, to our way of thinking, that she had thought we needed to be there, unless it was simply that she knew the barn would be locked in our absence. One thing we all readily admitted, whatever went on in the barn had nothing to do with us; we were powerless to control what went on and powerless to affect the timing. Sometimes we had come to an atmosphere of a spiritual presence that affected us in different ways but on other visits we just got on with the job and went in and out of the barn to collect and return tools like any other barn. When I had first said that I wanted the plot, my focus had been on owning a tiny slice of the countryside where I could sit, listen to the birds and recharge my batteries. The bonus came with visiting the site, seeing the sea and listening to the waves. I think I always assumed I'd be on my own for the most part and I was content with that. Over the months there had been a shift from nature to people, first with Dan and Tasha, then Bill with his beloved Beryl, then Cheryl. It was only as I ran through the list that I realised that Beryl and Cheryl rhymed and it made me smile. Finally, there was the amazing Mavis. Except

I knew it wasn't finally. And then of course, there was God in the person of the Holy Spirit revealing Jesus.

I went home, leaving Dan and Cheryl to enjoy the space on their own. Later in the evening, Dan rang to tell me that Bill had dropped by Small Field. He had said that there was no need for me to layer the hedges because he was more than happy to do it for me. He had layered miles of hedges over the years but now contractors came and chewed them up. His skills were no longer needed and would die out with him but in the meanwhile he could keep his hand in at Small Field. I knew he would do a better job than I would and be quicker but it took a full week to let go enough to ring him and thank him. As it turned out, Bill could only do the job at weekends and when I turned up one Saturday he had made a start on the eastern hedge. He showed me what he was doing, cutting through much of the thickness of a branch or trunk before bending it horizontally and pinning it with a hazel peg. I couldn't understand how the hawthorn or hazel could survive. Bill handed me the knife and let me have a go. As with any expert he made it look easy but I made a hash of it until I found the right angle to chop at. Bill was proving crucial to the plans for Small Field and I wondered how much more he felt he needed to do in honour of Alec Green. I began to understand that he had moved beyond that stage and was now revelling in using his traditional skills and knowledge to preserve a bit of his beloved Devon countryside, no matter how small.

I turned to brushcutting the remaining hedge that divided the end of Small Field from the wood. It wasn't really a hedge, more of a tangled barrier of thorns, but Bill came over to me. "I hope you don't mind me interfering like, Tony, but if I show you what to save, I reckon there is the beginnings of a young hedge among that lot."

"Go ahead, Bill."

"Well then," said Bill, bending down. "This here is hazel. Quick growing and easy to train into a hedge. This one, very young yet, is hawthorn. They call it quickset. It is lethal with its thorns and makes a good barrier against people and animals alike. This one, you obviously know, is holly. With all of them it is important not to let them grow leggy but cut off the leading shoot to encourage side growth. Honeysuckle is not going to do much for the structure but no harm in leaving it. All 'h's notice: hawthorn, holly, hazel and honeysuckle. Then there's gorse. Keep chopping it down and it should die out. It will slow up your work picking out the good stuff but it will be worth it I reckon."

"Thanks Bill. I'm learning a lot from you." Bill walked away but turned around.

“Oh, another thing. You’re going to need a gate into Small Field from the top of the track. If you let the hedge grow right across, you obviously lose your own access; if you leave a gap, you’ll have no way of keeping vehicles out. So, you need a gate.” Bill had the faintest of smiles that suggested he had a secret that he had been trying hard to hide. “The estate have been taking out all the wooden field gates and putting in galvanised ones. Easier to maintain. Most of the wooden ones are rotten or split and they are being burnt but I saw one that was still in place that was fairly new. I said to the manager, ‘I see there’s still one of they old gates up at South Meadow. You leaving that one as it’s not as bad as the rest?’ ‘No’ he says, ‘standardising them all.’ ‘Oh,’ says I, all innocent like, ‘if you’re going to burn it, can I take it?’ ‘Bill,’ says he, ‘you’re a rogue and I don’t know what you’re playing at, but if you can get that gate off its posts before Smith and Cotton get here, you can have it.’ ‘That’s very generous,’ says I. ‘Not really,’ he fired back at me. ‘They’re booked in for 8am tomorrow.’”

“It’s too late for us to get it then,” I said.

“It would be,” said Bill, with his smile creeping back in, “except tis already on the back of Beryl. You’ll need two new posts though. Make sure they are pressure treated.” Then he let his full smile spread across his face; the smile of a satisfied man.

A few days later, I was watching a documentary about Hong Kong. I don’t know quite how the mind makes these jumps but my mind jumped when they talked about space being so precious the only way to build had been up. Immediately I ‘saw’ the big oak tree at Small Field. The space at Small Field is so precious that the only way to create more is to go up. Whilst the documentary continued in front of me, what I saw was not high-rise apartments and offices. What I saw was a tree house spanning the huge branches of the major oak, circling the trunk like the platform around the light of a lighthouse.

I bought the treated gateposts that Bill had specified and bags of quick-setting concrete. On a whim I added two wooden picnic tables with bench seats. I spotted a wooden ‘PRIVATE. No public access’ sign near the till and thought it would be wise to fit it to our gate. A friend of mine lent me his Landrover that would cope with the rubble-filled track and Dan came with me to dig the holes for the gateposts. The Landrover was very old, very noisy and produced some alarming smoke out of the exhaust. I thought maybe my driving was part of the problem but Dan kindly assured me it was the vehicle. It was a good job we only had a twenty-mile drive to Small Field because regular backfiring and a noisy exhaust turned a few heads as we passed habitation. I kept expecting

flashing blue lights to come after us but we got to Small Field, culminating in a lurching and rattling approach up the track.

It took us all day to fully clear and level the necessary gap in the hedge before digging two square holes and setting up the posts in concrete. The result looked OK but it had been a tense day. Both of us had been aware of it and put it down to our drive in the Landrover. We moved our chairs closer to the barn in the hope that a better atmosphere would lift our spirits. Instead, we felt worse.

“We’ve done something wrong, Tony, but I can’t pin it down. Something doesn’t feel right,” said Dan.

“It can’t be the gate posts, surely?” I responded. “Bill’s getting hold of the gate felt like such a blessing.”

“Perhaps we’ll feel better after a beer,” said Dan producing two bottles from his backpack. “Is there still stuff to unload from the Landrover before we go?” I got up to go and check. The back of the Landrover was empty at first glance but just as I was about to return to Dan, I saw the ‘Private’ sign tucked into the far corner. I knew immediately that this was the problem. I brought it back to Dan and showed it to him without comment.

“That’s it,” said Dan. “Seems such an innocent little sign but I reckon God is using it to show us something about his plans for Small Field. He’s busy drawing people here and your sign is to keep people out.”

I got out my penknife and started to shave the wooden sign whilst having a beer. It took a while but the pile of shavings at my feet burnt quickly leaving a small circle of ash. Dan and I gave each other a hug and each breathed a sigh of relief. All felt good again. We had learned a painful lesson but we also felt excitement at the potential ahead.

We crashed down to earth when I started up the Landrover and eased it over the first lumpy section of the track. There was a loud roar and a metallic clunk. Part of the exhaust pipe had dropped off. I slumped over the steering wheel and Dan beat the dashboard. I had let my breakdown cover lapse and Dan’s was only valid for his own car. We walked up the lane to the farm, hardly daring to hope that Bill might be there. He wasn’t. The man we took to be the farm manager was just about to climb into his car and didn’t seem interested in our plight. He jerked his thumb at a huge barn and said, “Try Andy, he’s good with machines.”

We entered the barn and called out ‘hello’ several times, our voices echoing around the massive space. A head appeared above us, looking down from a sort of gantry. “If I can tie it on with baler twine, it might get you to a garage,” offered Andy. “Let’s give it a



try.” His cheerful willingness gave us hope. When he had climbed down, he said, “We’ll go in the van. I never walk unless I have too.”

The three of us squeezed into the front of the van and we pulled up at the entrance to the track, the Unmetalled Road. “All my years here I never noticed that sign,” laughed Andy. “What were you doing, trying to drive up that?” We got away without having to answer him and he lowered himself onto the stones. “Still attached at one end. I can do this.” He pushed himself out from under the Landrover. “Tell you what though. Best reverse out onto the lane first, cos if I fix it you’ll shake it off again on this rough track.”

“What about the noise?” I asked.

“No-one around to hear,” smiled Andy.

I very slowly reversed the Landrover, trying to keep my revs as low as possible, tensed up as if my tensing would somehow make it quieter. As soon as I was on the tarmac, Andy lay down and slid underneath, lifting the fractured end of the exhaust into position. He produced a rag from his pocket and wrapped it around the join before tying it in place with the baler twine. “Try that,” he said, bouncing clear. I started up the Landrover and gently pressed the accelerator. It was pretty noisy. “Hop in,” said Andy to Dan. We eased forward as Andy leaped back into his van without waiting for thanks and we waved our appreciation.

We took the drive at a slow, slow 20 miles an hour, incurring the wrath of some drivers despite our hazard warning lights flashing. After a few miles without any sign of a garage, I felt confident enough to carry on home if Andy’s bandage held in place. We made it under the cover of darkness, both wiped out. I would take the Landrover to the local garage in the morning.

## **EIGHT: CROWDED OUT**

Dan was too busy to join me on my next two visits but he said that Cheryl was keen to come the following week and would bring Tasha with her. I had had a second key cut for the barn, initially just a precaution in case we lost the original, but it meant that Dan and his family could access the barn if I wasn’t there. I was delayed setting off from home and when I reached Small Field, Cheryl and Tasha were sitting at one of the picnic tables with food and drink spread out in front of them. I hardly noticed them though because a family of five were having their lunch at the table nearest the cliff path. I had to deal with a flicker of resentment at their presence but they were so friendly as I walked past them that I could only respond with grace. The father got up from his seat and held out his hand to me.

“Hi, I’m Tom. I presume you’re Tony. Cheryl told us a bit about this place. Thanks so much for letting us picnic here; it’s perfect. We’ve just seen a treecreeper, and Jack, that’s my eldest over there, thinks he saw a barn owl. In the daytime! Is that possible? You’ve got a barn!”

“Yes, I’m the owner. Or rather custodian,” I said. “It is a special place, though we’ve got more work to do. I’ll just have a word with those two ladies and I’ll come back.”

I walked over to Cheryl and Tasha who both hugged me with great strength. We exchanged greetings but I was distracted by the sight of the gate, hanging from its post. “We wondered how long it would take you to notice!” giggled Tasha. “It went on like a dream. Tom helped us. I think he thought two women couldn’t manage but actually it was easier with three pairs of hands. They were already here when we arrived and we didn’t have any grounds to ask them to leave. They meant to set off ages ago but they just love it.”

I couldn’t get a word in and just said, “Amazing!” when Tasha finished. I walked over to the gate and stroked the top rail. I was so glad it wasn’t a new gate because it blended perfectly with its surroundings. Cheryl joined me.

“Have you introduced them to our barn?” I asked.

“No, we thought we’d wait for you and anyway we’ve only just finished the gate.”

I went back to Tom and his family who were packing up their stuff. Tom’s wife, Amy, looked up and said, “Its got such good vibes here. What do you do?”

“Nothing, apart from clearing the ground and now fitting a gate, thanks to you, Tom. Have you seen inside our little barn?” The three children ran to the doorway and I was disappointed to see them still standing up when they got inside. Amy and Tom followed and I could see by their expressions they wondered what was the point. Amy went down poleaxed, Tony staggered like a drunkard and the three children slumped into a corner. I left them to it and talked with Cheryl and Tasha about my plans for a tree house. They both responded with great excitement. The three of us stood looking at the bigger oak, trying to visualise where we could position the tree house and how big we could make it. It could be a great way of extending the area of Small Field. Our discussions were brought to a sudden halt by a shriek from the barn.

“I’m healed, I’m healed. I know I’m healed!” Amy emerged, leaping like a new-born lamb, kicking her legs out and twirling around. Her face was radiant. All we could do was stand and watch at a safe distance to keep away from her feet. Tom walked over to

us with the children at his side, all four of them jabbering in their excitement. It was almost impossible to get the sense of what they were saying except I picked out 'M.E.' several times. Amy was still pirouetting but the pace and energy had slowed slightly; it looked like an act of worship, a spontaneous and beautiful offering to the God who had clearly healed her. She was oblivious to us seven, her head and arms raised to the sky.

Tom quieted his children and told us that Amy had had M.E. that had degenerated over the years. Today had been one of her better days and she had insisted on a coast walk, though she knew she would pay for it tomorrow. She had only just made it to the top of the path and the picnic table had been such a gift. She was sensitive to spiritual things and to the energy of places or vibes. When Tom had seen Amy fall on her face in the barn, he had been frightened that she had collapsed from overdoing her walking but then he had felt something of the power and presence in the barn. "What is it?" he asked us.

"It is the power of God present to heal," I said.

"We don't believe in God. We've never been to the synagogue or church or anything." Tom added.

"That hasn't stopped God from blessing your family, though. Look at Amy now," Tasha said.

Amy was kneeling on the ground silently weeping. She looked at us and got to her feet. "I thought some amazing energy had healed me. I knew I was healed when something fizzed through my whole body. And I was so excited. Then when I was leaping around for the first time in years, a figure stood in front of me. I'm into angels a bit, but this figure held out his arms, smiled at me and said, 'I'm Jeshua. I'm the one who healed you.' So I worshiped him with my dancing and it was as if he was dancing with me. I believe he is Jeshua, the Messiah."

We sat down at the picnic tables, whilst Amy explained that they were Jewish, though they had been determined to remain secular. They knew enough of Judaism to know that Jeshua, or Jesus, was an offence to the Jews, but Jeshua had cut through all arguments and traditions by showing he loved her enough to heal her even though she didn't believe. "But I do now!" Amy added. Tom looked at his watch. "We must move. It's much later than we planned and we need to get home." We watched them finish packing up and walk away, thanking us for our picnic place.

## **NINE: WHERE'S BILL?**

I hadn't heard from Bill for some time, probably longer than I realised. I had phoned him a few times and got no answer and I

didn't have an address to write to. Bill would have nothing to do with 'them gadgets' so he hadn't got an email address and no mobile phone. I missed seeing him at Small Field too, not so much because of the work he put in, rather that I just liked him. I talked it over with Tasha on one of our work visits to Small Field and she said her parents were worried about him. On a whim, I left Tasha cutting back new growth and drove to 'Bill's farm'. The manager's posh car wasn't in the yard so I was certain he wasn't there. I walked around the yard and called into buildings. The whole place seemed deserted. So I got back into my car and decided to explore the nearest village and ask around for directions to Bill's house. I figured that Bill would be well-known in his community. I was wrong. As I drove around, the village was as deserted as the farmyard. I realised it was now a commuter village and kerbsides and driveways were mainly empty. There was no shop or pub either.

I parked up in the hope of finding somebody in their garden and I was just about to give up when I saw a patch of grey up a rough track. It was Beryll! Next to Beryl was an estate agent's sign: FOR SALE. The house was empty. So I drove to the estate agent's office fifteen miles away and asked about Bill. The young lady was friendly but could only tell me that the tenants had gone. When I told her my name, she gave me the number of a solicitor who apparently had been trying to contact me.

I was very disturbed. Had Bill and Mavis been ejected from their home? Why was Beryl still there? Was this yet another case of local people forced out by high rents and high house prices? Why would anybody be wanting to contact me? Where was Bill? I rang the solicitor from out in the road and was put through straight away to a Mr McPherson. The story was about as sad as it could get, though Bill and Mavis had not been ejected. Bill had been forced to retire by his manager who felt Bill was finally too old. Bill would have worked till he died, given the choice, and was only happy when out on the land. Shortly after his last day of work, Bill had had a heart attack and died immediately. When Mavis found him, he was clutching the keys to Beryl. Mavis died two days later. They had hardly a bean between them. I asked, "Why did you want to contact me?"

"Because you are the only name mentioned in his will apart from his wife, and she's gone. No children either, sadly. We thought you might have a clue about what or where Small Field is. He wanted his ashes spread there." I told Mr McPherson about Small Field.

With tears down my face, I was about to ring off. "Mr Farthing. There's another reason we needed to contact you. Bill left

you his tractor. You'll need the keys, though they've got the name Beryl on the fob. Any idea who Beryl is?"

I drove to Mr McPherson's office to sign for the keys and for the tractor and I left my email address for arrangements about Bill's ashes to be finalised. Then I sat in my car for a very long time, grieving over Bill yet smiling at my memories of him. Then I faced the task of telling Tasha.

Tasha burst into tears and we hugged each other. "I can tell you now," she said, "Bill swore me to secrecy. He came here one evening when I was still working with Mum. He looked surprised to see us, as if he'd been caught out. He told me he came most evenings after his tea, even if it was only to put in an hour clearing brambles. He was so happy here. He made me promise not to tell anyone, not even Mum. Not even you."

Bill and Mavis had a simple funeral together in the tiny village church. It had already taken place by the time I found out. Though he was seemingly not known in the village, I was told that the farming community came in large numbers, recognising that another connection with the old ways had gone. Knowing that I would be expected to shift Beryl soon, I drove to see Bill's manager, to ask if one of his workers would be available after work to drive Beryl and park it up below Small Field. I expected to have to deal with an uncaring money-man but was taught a lesson about not judging people. Gavin, the manager, greeted me warmly, seemingly glad to have a link with Bill. "I feel bad, Tony. I feel responsible for Bill's death. I had no idea that his job meant so much to him. I think taking him off the land broke his heart."

I thought the same, so I couldn't offer words of comfort.

"I'm sure we could have found some sort of niche for him," Gavin continued, "even if it was only part time. He was an old man, you know. Most people would have retired long ago. I would. He was as lean as a rake but his muscles were still working. I sometimes used to see him down the lane, long after he knocked off work. If I'd stayed on of an evening, I used to see him heading this way and I wondered what he was doing."

This was my cue to tell Gavin about Bill's part in clearing Small Field. I was a little wary, given Bill's acquisition of hard core and gate, but Gavin was interested. "May I come and see sometime?" he asked. "I liked Bill and respected his knowledge. He loved to share what he knew."

"We are planning to have a little ceremony at Small Field to honour Bill and scatter his ashes. If you would like to come, I'll let you know when we have a date fixed. Failing that pop along any

time you want. It's only two miles away where the lane turns a tight corner and up the Unmetalled Road."

"I'll be there," he said. It was only when I was half-way home that I realised I hadn't talked to Gavin about Beryl.

By now it was early April. There is something special about this time of the year when the baton change of the relay race of spring flowering takes place. The primroses and celandines are still in flower, although losing some of their perfection, and violets, stitchwort and wild strawberries take over the next leg, ready to hand over to campion and bluebells. The gorse, always yellow, has a special vibrancy. So I was keen for our celebration of Bill's life to take place very soon.

Tasha, Dan and Cheryl wanted to be involved with planning the ceremony and we met at my home to discuss it. We spent most of the time sharing our memories of Bill and in the process agreed that that was all we needed to do when we met to spread his ashes at Small Field. "Bill would want no fuss," said Tasha. "But he wouldn't want Mavis left out either."

I rang Gavin to let him know our plans. We were going to park in the village and walk up the cliff path as a way of remembering Mavis' triumphant first struggle up to the top, and after we had spread the ashes we would have a cream tea and talk about Bill. Bill had a passion for cream teas and he couldn't care less whether the jam or the clotted cream went first. He said that all that mattered was that both were piled as thick as possible. Cheryl baked the scones and we rustled up various flasks to make teas, leaving everything in the barn. I had rung Gavin to talk about the need to move Beryl and dropped off the keys.

On the day, we met at the foot of the cliff path. I was the last to arrive and was stunned to see a large group waiting for me. In addition to Dan, Cheryl and Tasha, there was Gavin and three of his farm workers, and a group with backpacks and boots who obviously were walking the coast path. Dan said, "These folk thought we were a bunch of ramblers and tried to pick our brains about places to eat. Tasha offered them cream teas!" I looked across at Tasha who was busy talking to one of the walkers. I wasn't very pleased with her invitation, wondering how to share out the scones and teas.

I led the way up the slope, carrying the small urn with Bill's ashes. There was something so bizarre in what we were doing that I started to laugh. It seemed totally irreverent but when I looked back, everybody else was smiling and chatting. I think there were thirteen of us. At the top, I stood to one side and let everyone else enter Small Field. At the far end, the gate was open and Beryl was parked up with one of Gavin's team in the driving seat. She climbed

down and joined us. And without warning, all of us fell to the ground. It was the first time the power had fallen without people entering the barn. When I fell, the urn spun out of my hand, the lid came off and Bill's ashes were scattered. I couldn't stop laughing: if Bill didn't want any fuss, he certainly got his wish.

And then the most beautiful sound of singing filled Small Field, soft and gentle yet somehow powerful. The sound came from a choir, not a heavenly choir but an earthly choir of fourteen voices, all united in praising God in words we didn't understand. How delighted Bill would have been that his death and his ashes had led to all this. For over an hour, fourteen bodies lay like a scene on a battlefield, yet for me it seemed to pass like a flash. Gavin was the first to stand up and he spoke to his workers. "I'm sorry guys. I've not dealt fairly with you and I'm going to review your contracts in the morning."

Two of the walkers were crying though they didn't share what was happening to them. Cheryl and Dan both felt they needed to move to Devon from their beloved Bristol home and Jen, the lady who had driven Beryl, simply whispered, "Jesus is here."

It felt the right time to open up the barn and serve teas and scones to everybody at the picnic tables. It was no feeding of the five thousand but there was enough.

## TEN: ABSENCE

I wasn't able to go back to Small Field for over a month. A hernia operation led to an enforced rest which unfortunately coincided with Dan, Cheryl and Tasha having a family holiday before Tasha started voluntary work overseas. On the way I was apprehensive about what I would find when I got there: Had it been vandalised? Was it overgrown? Was Beryl OK? Was there a lot of litter? I parked on the track by the gate and walked through the gate. It had been left open. I was appalled at the rampant growth of bracken and bramble in particular. It was the peak growing season and there had been plenty of rain: I'd seen it being driven onto the hospital window and on my windows at home. It had been heavy at times with unseasonal gales blowing in from the south-west. My trousers were soaked when I pushed through the vegetation but I was glad I was wearing trousers because several ticks clung to the fabric. I brushed them off, aware of the risk of Lyme's Disease from their bites. The sun broke through making the whole site dance with sparkling beads of rain and the beauty was overwhelming. As I looked around, I couldn't see a single piece of litter, no graffiti or

gouging on the picnic tables and no damage to the barn. Only the open gate was evidence that visitors had been and gone.

I wasn't allowed to do a lot of physical stuff but I got the brushcutter out of the barn and made a tentative start at cutting a way from the cliff path to the picnic tables and then from the picnic tables to the gate. It was only when I stopped for a much-needed drink that I realised I had worked for two hours without any tiredness. I smiled towards the barn knowing where my energy had come from. A woodpecker drilled a tree some distance away. I can't explain why but for me it is always a comforting sound. A chiff chaff was up in the oak tree and then I saw my first nuthatch. It was good to be back.

I heard voices approaching on the coast path. It sounded as if a group were labouring up the steep climb, as if they were carrying heavy backpacks. I remembered the effort Dan and I had put into slogging up the slope to bring tools here before we created the access through the gate and had the luxury of driving up the stony track. "There's someone here!" A teenage girl appeared first, followed by a group of young people, all carrying loads; not just backpacks but tools! They hesitated to come closer as if they felt they were intruding.

"Come in!" I shouted. "You're very welcome."

They were surprisingly diffident but one of the group came and sat down opposite me, looking at my brushcutter. "You beat us to it. We were going to clear the ground. When we first came here the grass was short and the brambles were kept in check and we could tell it was looked after. We kept coming back until it got overgrown."

Another member of the group joined us. "Yeah. Like we all had a meeting in the pub and had this idea. If we kept it tidy, we could make it our regular haunt. Maybe even camp. Is it private property? Is it yours? I see you've got the barn open."

By this time the whole group had gathered round, generally friendly, yet with a hint of hostility as if I had spoilt their plans. I explained briefly how I had come to own it, how Beryl came to be there, and tried to tell them about what sometimes happened in the barn. They only really seemed interested in the field rather than the barn, but one girl grabbed the hand of another and said, "C'mon Steph! Let's look. Sounds cool."

Steph and her friend, who turned out to be called Ful, short for Fulham because her dad was a passionate Fulham football supporter, ran to the barn and we heard giggling. It went on for a while, rising and falling in waves, before Steph came out. "Oh my God! No, I mean it literally. Oh my God! There is a God! I met him. He smiled at me! Like he really smiled at me! And Ful, she's



not laughed since her Dad died. Never got over it. But she's still in there and won't come out. She's so happy!"

It was inevitable that the rest of the group would want to experience what was on offer, and they pushed and shoved to get in through the door. Space in the barn was limited, even more so since we stored tools in there. The woodpecker was still drumming away and I could hear it despite the laughter coming from inside the barn. Then, Ed, the one who had first sat down, came out. "There's a presence in there. I'm not getting any of the stuff of the others, no laughing or whatever. But I'm changed. I'm cleaned. I want to know who that presence is. I need to know him more."

One by one the others came to the table and squeezed in tight so that everyone somehow fitted in. They were all leaning forward, so eager to know that it was almost intimidating. I silently prayed the shortest prayer of my life: "Help!" And then the words came flowing out, simply, and they all understood. The atmosphere around us was holy. As Steph said, "You can almost smell it."

I told them that the presence is the Holy Spirit of God, the only true God, who sent Jesus to pay for our sins by dying on the cross." None of them knew about the crucifixion of Jesus. "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Son of God and follows him has the promise of an everlasting life with him in heaven. Hang on a minute." I went over to the barn and pulled out a box. "I wondered why we had six of these. There's a Bible here; one each." I was amazed when they each opened their Bible and started to read. They were completely absorbed. I thought, "Well that's the end of my brushcutting."

Then, one guy, Damian, who had been very quiet ever since they arrived, said, "You know what. We've got time to hit this place and between us we can cut back most of it." The transformation from deep reverence to manic activity was instantaneous. They swarmed. One found Dan's brushcutter and filled it with petrol and wielded it like an expert. The others took pruning shears, loppers and scythes. It was then that I found out they were students at an agricultural college.

## **ELEVEN: CONFRONTATION**

I left them around 6pm, leaving the barn open for them in case they needed shelter in the night. I took the key though. When I came back in the morning, there were seven of them were gathered around a perfect circle cut in the grass and a fire with sausages sizzling on it. The field was tidy with all their belongings piled on one of the picnic tables. I could see no sign of crushed grass where tents would have been pitched and they all looked very sleepy. "We

were awake all night,” said Loris. “We have so much to tell you. We hadn’t read a lot of our Bibles but it seemed like we were being taught direct by God. He would teach one of us one thing and then something quite different to another of us. It has been awesome.”

“Yeah, and we had visitors. Just after dark,” said Ful. “Best if Damian tells you. He handled it mainly.”

Damian seemed reluctant but I could tell it wasn’t diffidence; it was humility. “We had come back up from the beach. We had stayed down there longer than we meant to and we came back up the cliff in the dark, which wasn’t ideal. When we got to the entrance to Small Field there was a group of four coming up from the other side. They had torches and there was something about them that made us uneasy. And it had nothing to do with it being night-time. One of them, a woman, said, ‘We know all about you and what goes on here. We intend to use the power for our work. We can harness that.’ Something in me took over and I knew they were witches and they wanted the power to serve Satan. Like I said, something took over in me, and I said, ‘Leave here. In the name of Jesus, I command you.’ And they left. Well, three of them did, but the youngest one, younger than the others, cried out ‘Jesus’ and she has stayed here all night. They tried to come back later in the night when we were praying, but I had prayed the blood of Jesus over the whole site and they couldn’t get off the cliff path.”

Damian told me all this very matter-of-factly. I asked him, “How did you know what to do? To be honest I don’t think I would have known.”

“Well, like I said, something took over. It’s been like that ever since you left. Steph’ll tell you.”

“Yes, Tony. I read a bit of my Bible where people got baptised and I thought, we need to get baptised but they got baptised in a river and we haven’t got much water. Then Ed said, like, there’s the sea. So we traipsed off down to the cove. Three of us got baptised by the others and it felt so, so good even though it was freezing, but the undertow nearly had Ful and it was getting dark. So we came back. The others were massively disappointed but when we got back we found those 5-litre bottles of water in the barn. Hope you don’t mind but we poured a whole one over each of them. It wasn’t the same as going under in the sea but they were ok about it. We’ll pay you back.”

Ful joined in. “We haven’t been to sleep and we never did get round to eating last night so this really is break-fast. Would you like a sausage? Grab a bun. There’s some pretty awful coffee over there, too.”

All of these young people had matured overnight. They were open and honest and admitted they had planned to have sex

in the dark but each one had known it would have displeased the Holy One. Instead, they had sung songs they made up to praise God and prayed for their fellow students. Throughout the night they got words of teaching and Steph said, “We reckoned they would be in the Bible but it was too dark to read and anyway we wouldn’t have known where to look.”

All the time they spoke and we ate, I kept looking at the girl who had arrived with the witches. Her face was alight and she had no self-consciousness about me joining them. Damian caught me looking at her and introduced me to Kate. He said, “Kate’s got a tough call. She’s got to go back home to her mum who leads the coven. We’ve not had time to teach her much. And we don’t know a lot yet anyway but Kate’s got this incredible understanding of the power of the name and blood of Jesus to protect her. Kate spoke very quietly, “I have nothing to fear.”

Ed asked, “Can we have one more bottle of water to put out the fire?” The fire hissed and sparked and died with the thinnest whisp of smoke rising in a perfectly straight line. Ed pushed apart the ashes and said, “Whilst we pack up, we’ll let that go cold. Then we’ll put back the turf. We were going to stay today and do some more maintenance work but to be honest we are wiped out.”

I walked back to my car and carried my ladders to the barn. “What are they for?” asked Joss.

“Sometime I’m going to build a tree house in that oak. I’ll need to ladder to fix the first ropes in the tree but not yet.”

Damian’s eyes gleamed. Ed said, “Let him do it for you, Tony. He climbs like a monkey!”

So I handed the rope to Damian and propped the ladders against the mighty trunk of the oak. Damian was up the ladders and out along one of the branches in seconds. “You’re going to need the ropes clear of the trunk to lift your wood without snagging. If you want help building it, I’m your man.”

And so it was that I had an extra team of six willing estate workers including a construction expert whose dad was a carpenter.

## **TWELVE: THE END**

I was half watching the news and half doing a crossword when the newsreader grabbed my attention.

The largest recorded cliff fall in the UK took place last night on the Devon Coast. No footage is available of the collapse but aerial photography reveals the extraordinary extent of the damage. John

McGinnis has the story. "Yes, thank you Alec. As you say, this is without doubt the biggest collapse along any section of the coast. We can't get near to show you the scene but an estimated 300 metre length of the Devon coast has simply gone overnight. During the hours of darkness torrential rain and gale force winds battered the coast. Elsewhere there have been minor slips but nothing on this scale. I am standing on the shoreline well away from the collapse and from here all you can see is a long line of newly exposed cliffs and millions of tons of rock in the sea. Sediment from the fall has turned the sea red for a distance about 400 metres out to sea. Here is some footage taken from the air by local pilot Jim Whiteley. Talk us through this Jim. "Yeah. Well, as we run this through again you can see my line of approach towards the land. This is the calm after the storm. Conditions were perfect for flying with light breezes and excellent visibility. I'm coming in now over the site and you can see among the rocks other debris: mature trees and stones and slates from some sort of building. The area goes well inland to create a sort of cove."

"Thanks Jim. As far as we know no-one's home is affected and no lives lost. Had it been in the daytime there might have been people on the beach below. I'm joined by Dale Pengarrick, a fisherman who was bringing his boat home at the time of the cliff fall. Dale, I understand you were just offshore when you heard a roar." "Yes. It gives a measure of how loud because me and the crew heard it above the storm. We got caught out at sea when the winds increased. They hadn't been forecast quite that bad and to be honest I wasn't sure we were going to get home. It was pitch black but we all heard this explosion and a rumble like nothing I've ever heard. It sounded like war. Then big waves hit us and ..."

I only caught the gist of what the fisherman said. I was numbed by what I saw. It could have been almost any part of that stretch of coast but I recognised the massive oak and the distinctive colour of the stonework from the barn. Although they weren't conclusive signs, I knew that the cliffs were those around Small Field.

The phone rang. I wouldn't have answered but Dan's number was displayed. "Hi Tony. It is isn't it?" I couldn't get my head round any words. "Tony. You OK?" "It's over, isn't it," I stuttered.

The following day, Dan and Cheryl came round. None of us had any desire to visit whatever was left of Small Field, if anything. It was like viewing the body of a loved one. But we all sensed we needed to make the site safe if it hadn't already been done. As the land had been legally mine, I particularly felt responsible for it and we went in my car. When I turned into the lane leading to our track, we were blocked by a police car. I explained that I owned the property at the summit of the cliff and I wanted to do what I could to block access to the area.

"I think you'll find that is done, sir, but they may be glad to have your contact details. I know they are worried about the

building remains that were at the foot of the cliff. Did anyone live here?”

“No. It was just a small barn with some tools in it. Some friends of mine sometimes camped up here overnight, but not in the kind of weather we’ve had lately, and I’ve checked. They’re all at home.”

“Go on up then, sir. But you’ll have to walk.” He spoke into his radio. “Sending up a party of three including the landowner. They may have useful info.”

We squeezed past a variety of emergency vehicles and cars including several media representatives. The track was filled with people and I had difficulty in convincing them that we had a right to even be there. When we got as far as the gate, I was appalled, and I stood with Dan and Cheryl in shocked silence. Less than 10 metres beyond the gate was a void with nothing to see but the sea. The gate had already been padlocked and endless lengths of barbed wired wound around each individual rail. There was a large sign attached to the gate: DANGER. UNSTABLE CLIFF. POSITIVELY NO ADMITTANCE. A smaller sign read: NO ACCESS TO COAST PATH. It seemed so superfluous that I laughed. People at the gate swung round angrily and Cheryl defended me by saying, “It’s a big shock to us.”

I was unsure who I was talking with in the group but they were pleased with my confirmation that no-one lived on the site nor would have been staying. Because the barn had not appeared on recent maps there had been real concern for people’s safety. Apart from the narrow five-metre strip, I no longer owned Small Field. One woman from the council told me that even that could fall; further cracks had been detected. Gavin, from the farm, emerged from the throng of people. “It’s a choker, Tony. We’ve lost a lot of land and they already are pressing us to create a permissive path to restore the coast path. It’ll mean a big detour inland. I’m sorry about Small Field and all that it represented.”

Another official came up to Gavin. “What we want to do is block off this access track. Can you fence it off securely?”

“I think you’ll find that is your department,” Gavin replied with some satisfaction. “The sign at the bottom says ‘Unmetalled Road’. It’s for the council or the highways people to deal with it.”

Dan, Cheryl and I came away. We were superfluous. On the drive back we suddenly all needed to talk about Small Field, reminiscing over what we had done, what had happened and people we had met. The conversation continued well into the night, when Dan suddenly said, “Beryl! What happened to Beryl?”

“I expect that, at some time in the future, a rusty bit of metal will be washed ashore,” I said. “Maybe a number plate.”

## THIRTEEN: THE BEGINNING

“We need to go home,” said Dan.

“Well, you are more than welcome to stay here,” I offered.

“No, we need to go,” said Cheryl. “But let’s pray together first. It isn’t the end of the world.”

“Say that again,” I asked.

“What? It isn’t the end of the world?”

“Yes. Thank you. Cheryl. That kind of makes sense of what I was reading this morning. Jesus was warning his disciples that wars and earthquakes and famines would happen. His disciples were asking him about the end of the age, effectively the end of the world. But do you know what Jesus said? He said those things were the beginning of birth-pains. Get it? All those disasters and Jesus focused on what they would lead to. Birth! Something new, something better. His mindset was different from ours, different from the world view. He looked ahead. Something had to end before the next beginning. That’s what we need to see with Small Field. And the barn. Something new has to happen. Maybe something better!”

Dan interjected, “I get it. It’s like the seed that Jesus taught about. Got a Bible handy, Tony?” I handed him my Bible. “Yes. Here it is. He is talking about himself, that he has to die because his death will result in many lives. Listen up: ‘I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.’ But none of this explains why God allowed Small Field to fall into the sea. It certainly fell to the ground, though!”

Cheryl said, “We still need to pray, guys. We need to understand. I sense something big lies up ahead.”

We prayed, sometimes out loud, sometimes quietly listening, before Cheryl said, “I think I see. The clue is in the name Small Field, *Small* Field. God led me just now to this scripture: ‘I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields. They are ripe for harvest.’ The barn, everything that went on in it and everything that happened in Small Field was awesome. But, in a way, it was like a trailer for a blockbuster film. It was only a taster. We had got into the habit of drifting around and waiting for people to turn up and see what God did. We were lazy, spiritually at least. We were looking at Small Field because we all loved it, and I’m sorry it’s gone, Tony. It’s hardest for you. But see what Jesus says, ‘Open your eyes and look at the fields.’ Not just one field; not just a small field!”

“So, we go out and buy more fields,” said Dan. Sorry, I’m too tired to follow this.

“No, Dan, you darling dimwit! The fields are out there, people in the street, neighbours, wherever. We take God to the people. His Spirit is in us, isn’t he?”

“This is amazing, Cheryl. And scary! I’m sure you are right,” I said. “But it’s 4.45 and the night is nearly over and there are signs of daylight. Ha! A parable there. And we need sleep.”

We all leapt in our chairs when a gentle tapping came on the front door. Who could be around at this time? I opened the front door a crack. Standing there was a neighbour from across the road. I only knew him as Mr Jones, and only that because a letter for him with the correct address was wrongly put through my letterbox. On the rare occasions that we had talked on the street he had been a caricature of Mr Grumpy. I have to admit I tried to avoid him. I assumed he had come to complain about our lights being on. I couldn’t think of any other reason. “Hello, Mr Jones! Come in. What are you doing up at this time of night?”

“No, I won’t come in. I only came because the wife nagged me, said I needed to check you was OK. I don’t sleep well. Haven’t done for years. Got up and walked around and saw your lights on. Told the wife. I often wake her up. She said something must be wrong. ‘Never forgive ourselves if you was really ill or had an accident. Might have died, even,’ she said. That was over an hour ago. I kept checking and she wouldn’t let it go. I’ll go back now I sees you are OK. I got dressed and all. I shouldn’t have listened to her.”

Whilst I listened to Mr Jones, a little voice in me said, “offer him a cup of tea”. “Can I make you a cup of tea, Mr Jones?”

“I never turn down a cuppa. Never know when the next one’s coming. I was about to brew up meself before I was forced to come out.” Mr Jones stepped inside and into my living room where he froze when he saw Dan and Cheryl.

“We are all about to have a drink, Mr Jones. This is Dan and Cheryl. I’m Tony. Tony Farthing.”

My name was probably the best thing that could have happened at that moment because Mr Jones made all the usual jokes, “Not worth much, then. Small change out of you, then. Just like a short policeman: a small copper.” I couldn’t take offence and the jokes produced the first smile I had seen on his face. He sat down on the sofa next to Cheryl. “Now, what are you lot doing here? Having an orgy?”

Cheryl, said “No. We were talking about you?”

I wondered how Cheryl was going to justify what seemed like a lie. She certainly had Mr Jones' attention. "You don't even know me," he scoffed.

"No, but God does. He knows why you can't sleep and what makes you cross. Not only that but he has given us the job of praying for you and you will sleep well from now on."

"Didn't know there was a God. And anyway, why has he caused so much suffering in the world?" I was listening from the kitchen as I made a pot of tea. If I had been Dan or Cheryl, I would have bridled at Mr Jones blaming God. But Cheryl ignored the remarks and quietly said, "Your first name is Ebenezer. That's one thing that makes you cross, so you never let on to anybody if you can avoid it, do you Eb?" Eb was listening with his mouth and eyes wide open with astonishment.

I came back into the room with the tea and laid it quietly down on the coffee table. Dan looked up at me and said, "Your house, your call Tony. You pray for Eb."

The only words that came to my mind were, "Thanks pal!" Then the desperate prayer, "Lord, come." I couldn't afford to wait or Eb would be out of the door. "Eb, did you know that your name Ebenezer means a stone placed to mark where God had done something amazing? He's going to do something amazing for you now. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, be healed Eb." Nothing seemed to happen and I thought I had lacked the necessary faith. So I turned and poured out four teas. When I straightened up, I looked at Eb and his face was like a cross between an angel and a child. His eyes were closed and he was clearly worshipping silently. We sat and waited, drinking tea to keep awake. When Dan, Cheryl and I later compared notes, we had all understood that Eb's visit had been the hand of God, showing us a field that was ripe for harvest and encouraging us to see that he really had got bigger plans.

Eventually, Eb spoke quietly. "I never knew. God came when you prayed. I didn't see him but I knew he was here. I have such a peace. You're right; I will sleep. You know why? Because there was nothing physically wrong with me. It was bitterness. The wife, Muriel, always said I chose to drink bitter beer because I liked bitterness. Going to have to change my drink now!" He laughed. "I'd like to get to know this God better. Can you help me?"

We never did get to bed that night. A little tap on the door came again and a woman stood there looking anxious. "I don't suppose you've got Eb here, have you. I'm so sorry if he's been a nuisance."



“Pleased to have you here, Muriel. I think Eb has got a lot to tell you.” She squeezed alongside Eb on the sofa, staring with wide eyes at him.

Whilst Eb talked and Muriel listened, Dan dozed and Cheryl helped me make breakfast for five. It somehow seemed right to celebrate with the nearest thing to a feast that I could manage, and right to develop our relationship with Eb and Muriel. Whilst I was frying, I thought about Jesus telling a man to go and tell people what God had done for him and I was sure that Eb would do just that. Eb and Muriel told us they had lived here for all their married life and knew everybody. Eb had even been born only two streets away and I had a feeling that he was going to be the way into a new field, a bigger field, maybe bigger fields.