

SOMETHING OF
THE NIGHT

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A JOURNEY INTO THE DARKNESS
OF THE BRITISH ISLES

IAN MARCHANT

‘The Law is not the same at morning and at night’
George Herbert



London · New York · Sydney · Toronto · New Delhi

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NEIL

One morning in early November, I drove the 300 and some odd miles from Belfast to West Cork through endless pouring rain to spend a night in company with Neil.

Neil is a pal of mine and an astute reader.

‘Oh, I loved *The Longest Mile**, brilliant that was,’ he’d told me, months ago, in the garden of The Duke’s Arms in Presteigne, in the no longer extant Welsh county of Radnorshire.

‘Cheers Neil.’

‘Man, I’d have loved to have come with you to all those pubs.’

‘We could have hired a coach and sold tickets to all the blokes who wanted to come . . .’

‘I bet you could. What are you working on now?’

‘I’m writing this book about the night. It’s about all kinds of things that happen at night.’

‘Like what sort of thing?’

* I think he was referring to my last book, *The Longest Crawl*.

SOMETHING OF THE NIGHT

‘Like, anything that can happen at night,’ I said.

‘Like, what?’

‘Like, anything.’

‘Can I come on this one?’

‘Sure. So long as you’re up for anything . . .’

‘I am. Ian, I really am. Please can I come?’

Of course you can, Neil. I don’t know where I’m going, or what I’m doing, except that I’ll be trying to see in the dark. But of course you can come, and welcome.

ANYTHING COULD HAPPEN

When I was a kid, anything could happen in the night.

It very seldom did; but it could.

In the night, I could play centre back for Brighton and England. I could replace Macca on the bass guitar in the reformed Beatles.

I could say 'Hello' to Jackie Sinclair, the girl of my dreams.

In the night, Jackie Sinclair might drop by, unannounced. I could write a triple concept album based on her visit, and hire an all girl band to record it at Rockfield Studios. At night anything was possible.

When I was a kid, I loved going to bed, because it meant that I would be alone. I wasn't there to sleep; I was there to read, and play, and dream. I was one of those spoddy kids who read under the covers; when I was seven, to my eternal shame, my mum caught me crying my eyes out to Enid Blyton's *Five Bad Boys* by torchlight. Later on, I was similarly mortified when My Old Feller caught me relaxing with a copy of *Parade* which I'd had away from my paper round. Nights just got better the older you got.

Year after year and minute by minute, I stayed awake a little longer each night. I discovered that I was a night owl, though if there are day owls, I haven't heard them hoot.

A friend of mine, a devoted adherent of evolutionary psychology, tells me that my ancestors were probably the kind of cavemen who sat around keeping the fire going, telling stories, and generally guarding the women-folk. So, I've never been much of a one for sleeping at night. Daytime has always been my preferred downtime, a fact which goes some way to explain a series of still embittered ex-employers.

Night is therefore my most productive time, and I've tried to turn it to advantage. In the early Eighties, I nearly hacked a precarious living as a rock singer, and I still head off now and then to do the odd gig. For a musician or an actor, this ability to be awake and perky at night is something of a *sine qua non*. If you like to be tucked up by nine, you can forget that ambition to be the next Olivier or John Lydon. As a single parent, night time was always the time that I could work; it was the time when I taught myself to write, while the kids slept.

Night is still a time of work; 20 per cent of workers in the industrialised world work at night. The kids and the punters are tucked up in bed, so the shelves can be stacked, the Tube de-fluffed, and the motorways repaired. There is a special quality to night-shift work; indeed, night-shift workers see themselves as superior to the daytime bods.

And night is our time of greatest playfulness and freedom, of love and romance. We go to pubs, nightclubs, and all-night drinking dens; we go to cinemas, theatres and bingo halls. We go to night classes, dance lessons, the football and the dogs.

Nightingales sing in Berkeley Square. We fall in and out of love. Our culture is full of the romantic playful night.

But perhaps as a result of increased playfulness and freedom, the night has become heavily politicised, as the idea that inner-city areas are given over to drunken youth blossoms unchecked in the press and broadcast media. Still, there is truth mixed with the hysteria. It can be horrible out there at night. There's a half-eaten kebab, its gizzards strewn across the precinct slabs; there are hen parties in skimpy dresses and fairy wings being slammed into the back of a police van; there are young lads heaving up outside the KFC; Belisha beacons and ATMs are flashing on and off for no one; a faraway ambulance wails the estate to prayers and to bed. Crime is rife in the city night.

So the night is also the site of our greatest danger. It is a time of crime, and of transgressive sexuality. Prostitutes walk the streets; doggers crack off in the car parks of daytime beauty spots. Businessmen go to lap-dancing clubs to forget what waits at home. The police helicopter chatters overhead, chasing after lads hurdling garden walls. Dealers deal in shadowy corners. The A&E department is full of the walking and aggressively drunk wounded. Night is when we are most likely to die, to commit suicide.

And the night is the time of our greatest fears: of ghosts and ghouls, and vampires, and werewolves, of night terror and night sweats, of bogeymen hiding in the wardrobe. Monks chant Compline in freezing cloisters to keep us safe from the old powers of the dark.

Still, despite the horrors, the night is our time of rest and recuperation. We take up a hot water bottle, pull on our

jim-jams, snuggle under the duvet and blankets, breathe in the freshly laundered bedclothes, drink a soothing mug of Ovaltine, and read our Dan Browns. By day, bed is itself transgressive, naughty, forbidden. It's where we steal a nap, and it's where mum entertains the milkman. At night, bed becomes our refuge, a harbour from the dark and the cold fear of the looming unknown. And I may go late to bed, but when I do go, I sleep like a baby on barbiturates. Metallica could play outside my bedroom, and I wouldn't notice; in fact, Metallica might be put off their chops by the volume of my snoring. At least I don't talk in my sleep any more.

We sleep to dream. In dreams, our unconscious is loose, and doing what it will. We need sleep; we have evolved so that we need the night. Our circadian rhythms mean that our biological clocks are reset and our cells regenerate. We are born again, night after night. This we share with all life on the planet. The night is alive; the real night owls, the consumptive badgers, the eels that run up our rivers, the hateful slugs, invisible by day; all kinds of creatures live their lives by night.

During the day, our sense of wonder can be diminished. On the odd day when the clouds break, the blue of the sky serves as a reassuring ceiling which lets us focus on our lives. At night, we are confronted with the infinite nature of the universe, as countless billions of stars mock us with our insignificance. It is the stars that remind us of our microscopic size. The night sky can confront us with the sheer pointlessness of our existence; the things that seem to matter so much in the sun hardly matter at all by starlight. Paul Bowles makes this point the central image of his novel *The Sheltering Sky*: 'The sky hides the night behind

it, and shelters the people beneath from the horror that lies above.'

So unboundaried can our insignificance make us feel that we become gripped by night sweats, panic attacks, by the heebie-jeebies. I could die. I could stop breathing. How do you know that this breath isn't the last one? We can be overwhelmed by our imminent death. Philip Larkin knew that the darkest hour is just before dawn. In one of his last poems, 'Aubade', he comes awake 'in soundless dark' to see death a day nearer. Perhaps if he had been more of a night owl, his childhood would have been less boring, and the nights less full of horror.

Thinking about the night, meeting people at night, travelling by night, I realized that most of the important events in my life had happened under cover of darkness. I wasn't just a bit of a night owl; I was a full-on creature of the night. As I've changed, so have my nights; and as I talked to people, and read, and wrote, my story and the story of the night became indistinguishable in my thinking. This is the story of my nights, and not, I suppose, everybody's. It must be faced: I have something of the night about me, as I came to understand.

Take, for example, crime. Who should I talk to about night crime? Criminals, obviously. But where to find them? I hunted around for a while to find a criminal who would talk, and found a few. But this approach came to seem artificial. After all, some of my best friends are criminals. Most of them, now I come to think of it. Me too. Have been for years, since the night I met my great friend Perry Venus in a student disco at St David's University College, in the mid-Wales town of Lampeter one

night in 1976*. What better way to begin, then, than by committing a crime?

So here I am, one morning in early November, driving the 300 and some odd miles from Belfast to West Cork through endless pouring rain to spend a night in company with Neil, pal, astute reader and weed farmer – and to buy an ounce of his excellent home-grown spliff.

* I tell the story of our meeting in my book *Parallel Lines*. Perry was my travelling companion for *The Longest Crawl*. It isn't necessary for you to have read my other books in order to understand this one, but it is necessary that you buy them.

IN DORSET?

My old car, 125,000 miles already on the clock, is lapping up the road, but the journey is dull as the ditchwater which tips from the sky. It's pretty much motorway all the way from Belfast to Cork, apart from a gap in the north between Lisburn and Newry, and another in the south between the end of the M7 and the start of the M8. The M8 is proper in clear weather: fast and mostly empty of traffic, and so newly opened that it doesn't yet seem to exist on any maps, as it carves through the valley between the Galtee and Knockmealdown mountains. I know the mountains are there, through that thick mist, I can sense them as the light starts to fail. But in the rain, there is nothing to see and less to hear; I channel hop between dozens of radio stations, but they are all indistinguishable from one another, except for the Irish-language channel, where they chat away, I'm sure, about intelligent and interesting things in Irish Gaelic, and where also they play traditional Irish music, which I loathe above all things on earth. The English-language stations are mercifully free of Irish music, but otherwise they are without all merit. This is

what happens on Irish radio: a genial host plays unchallenging pop music, and chats on the phone to Irish celebrities about Irish things; mostly, today, *X Factor*, and the fate of the Irish Grimes twins, the hateful 'Jedward', hopefully, by the time you read this, condemned to the dustbin of history on their way to the landfill site of oblivion.

Also, people phone in to talk about their ill children, and the host says, 'Oh Noreen, you're in our prayers.'

The sports news is about Liverpool, Manchester United, Celtic, and hurling.

There are no service stations on any of the motorways, so in order to get a drink, you have to pull off and follow the signs to the nearest town, but I am late, and anxious, so I keep driving through that rain, hungry and thirsty and headachy from want of caffeine until I get the other side of Cork, out on the N71 towards Bandon, where I stop and grab a sandwich and a coffee, and phone my man to tell him I'm a bit late.

'That's alright, Ian,' says Neil. 'I'm always happy to wait in a bar.'

Shit. This is exactly what I'd hoped to avoid. Neil doesn't smoke his own home-grown. Neil's drug of choice is beer, and lots of it. Sometimes he doesn't drink at all; he'll go a fortnight, three weeks without touching a drop; and then he'll decide to go on a massive five-day drunk. I worry I might catch the start or, worse still, the end of one of his marathon binges.

I'm about 20 miles away from the bar where Neil is waiting for me, sinking pint after pint; it is dark now, has been since before Cork, and I'm on the back roads, and the rain is still falling in filthy sheets. I want to get to Neil as soon as I can, to

try to connect with him before the tenth pint, which is where things can start to get confused. I'm going too fast on these twisty roads; no faster than I would in the hills of home, but too fast for these uncertain, unfamiliar roads. Coming down a long straight, I see the yellow and black chevrons which the Irish use to show a tight bend, just perceptible through the gloom; I brake, perhaps too hard, and exercise a slow skid; I arc across the oncoming carriageway, glide into the entrance of a driveway which joins the road at that point, and come to a halt, my headlights lighting the wet road, facing again in the direction I want to go. That there had been no traffic coming the other way, and no traffic behind me; that there was a driveway at that exact point which I could skid off into, all struck me as miraculous.

I thought, 'God doesn't want me to die tonight.'

Not tonight. On the radio, the genial presenter is telling Aoife that he hopes her troubles end soon, and that she is in all the listeners' prayers.

'And after a song from Westlife, I'll be talking to Jedward's cousin about last night's thrilling results show . . .'

I drive into the little West Cork town where I have arranged to meet Neil. It looks orderly and quietly prosperous, but the high tide of wealth which washed all over the country during the 'Celtic Tiger' has now receded down the beach of Ireland's increasingly rickety economy, leaving shuttered bars and half-finished housing developments in its wake. I park the car, and walk into The Shamrock. There is no sign of Neil. The barmaid smiles.

'I'm looking for a mate of mine,' I tell her. 'His name's Neil.'

‘Oh sure, and he’s just gone to the jakes,’ she says, and Neil emerges from the Gents, zipping up his fly against his ample belly. We shake hands, his slightly damp.

‘I’m sorry I’m so late,’ I say. (Two hours.)

‘Mate, I told you. I’m always happy to wait in a bar.’

Neil is English, like lots of people out here. There is a legendary community out in these hills, called simply the Mountain, which in its time attracted dozens of disaffected English hippy travellers. Neil’s ex was one such; she had come out here in the Eighties, looking for an alternative lifestyle, and had ended up on the Mountain, living in a homemade bender with Neil, when he wasn’t on a bender himself. They had a son together, and she moved away, unable to cope with Neil’s drinking, leaving Neil in the bender. She and her son now live in the same old town as I do, and they are both good friends of mine. Neil rarely sees his son Mac these days, but when he comes to Wales to visit him, Neil always stays with me. I like Neil lots.

I’ve heard of the Mountain from other sources. After the Battle of the Beanfield*, lots of people in the Peace Convoy

* The Battle of the Beanfield took place on 1 June 1985. Over a thousand officers from Wiltshire Police cornered the Peace Convoy in a beanfield on the edge of Savernake Forest, and smashed their vehicles to pieces. *The Observer’s* Home Affairs correspondent Nick Davies was there. He wrote: ‘There was glass breaking, people screaming, black smoke towering out of burning caravans and everywhere there seemed to be people being bashed and flattened and pulled by the hair . . . men, women and children were led away, shivering, swearing, crying, bleeding, leaving their homes in pieces . . . Over the years I had seen all kinds of horrible and frightening things and always managed to grin and write it. But as I left the Beanfield, for the first time, I felt sick enough to cry.’ There was an ITN news crew present. The reporter, Kim Sabido, speaking to the camera, said, ‘What we — the ITN camera crew and myself as a reporter — have seen in the last 30 minutes here in this field has

who had been brutalized by the British state hopped onto the boat to Ireland, and came out to the Mountain for a while. My friend Panit Dave was one such.

‘We got off the boat at Rosslare with a goat and three chickens in the back of the van,’ Panit Dave told me, ‘and Customs waved us through. And then we headed out to West Cork, and stayed for three years.’

I’d met other travellers through Panit who were still out here, running businesses in Kinsale or Bantry, doing alright, one of them telling me at length about his reading of Gaddaffi’s *Green Book*, oddly enough. They only keep the van now for the long annual trip to Pilton. But at the core of the West Cork hippy life is still the Mountain. So after all I’ve heard about this place, it’s fascinating to be here, in Little Alternative England.

I take timid soundings, and find out that Neil’s only had three pints, which is well within the comfort zone. He buys me a pint of Murphy’s, the great drink of Cork, and we sit and chat while he has pint four. Then I buy him pint five, and pint two for me.

A grinning man, not as young as he looks, comes up to Neil in the bar.

‘Orlright Neil?’ he says.

‘Hello Gareth,’ says Neil. ‘I thought you were in England.’

‘I am, man. In Weymouth.’

‘In Dorset?’ I ask, helpfully. Gareth grins at me, but is unable to spot a music hall set-up line when he hears one.

been some of the most brutal police treatment of people that I’ve witnessed in my entire career as a journalist. The number of people who have been hit by policemen, who have been clubbed whilst holding babies in their arms in coaches around this field, is yet to be counted . . . There must surely be an inquiry.’ No such inquiry was ever held.

‘In Dorset, yeah. But the trial’s tomorrow, and the Gardai have flown me back, and put me up in a hotel, but they haven’t given me any money. They told me not to go out, and not to get pissed, but I smuggled two bottles of vodka through, and now I’ve given ’em the slip and come down here to see if anybody will buy me a pint.’ Neil sighs, and buys a pint for Gareth and number six for himself. He offers me a third, but I decline, given that we still have to drive out to Neil’s place on the Mountain, and also given that, although God doesn’t want me to die tonight, I don’t want to push my luck.

Gareth takes the pint, still grinning. It’s a grin I recognize: a junk grin, a vacuous empty grin with malice, even evil behind it.

A group of Irish people come into the bar, dressed in suits.

‘Hello Mr Quinn,’ says Neil to the youngest of the group. ‘If you’re wearing a suit, you’re either getting married, or been in court . . .’

‘I’ve been to my grandad’s funeral, Neil.’

Neil laughs. ‘Oops,’ he says.

‘Ooof,’ I say.

‘Time to go?’ says Neil.

We walk down to the supermarket and buy some steak mince, a jar of Dolmio spaghetti sauce, and a twelve-pack of Stella. I do my sums. Six pints, plus a twelve-pack; that’s a fair bit, even by Neil’s standards.

I ask Neil if he is alright driving, and he snorts contemptuously, as though six pints were hardly going to impair a chap’s ability to drive home from the pub. I get back into my car, and follow Neil in his as we drive out of town towards the Mountain.

We turn up lanes which grow narrower and steeper with each bend, and whose surfaces grow more rutted the higher we go; and finally we turn up a precipitous cinder track, and climb the side of the Mountain, my old car rumbling along in first gear. Neil lives in a house now; or, rather, a two-bed granny annexe on the side of a rather grand farmhouse, where a friend of his who is prone to occasional psychotic episodes spends his days. As we get out of our cars, a tiny sheepdog, little more than a puppy, half collie and half Jack Russell maybe, comes panting and tail-wagging towards us.

‘That’s Billy,’ says Neil. Billy licks my hands.

Below us, a long way below, are the lights of the little West Cork town we have just left. Above us, a sky bright with stars, now that the rain has been chased away to the north and east. Tomorrow will be clear.