

Betrayal

by

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Betrayal

I had a wonderful childhood. Born on a farm in Yorkshire, which overlooked a deep glacial valley on the edge of the Pennines, my first recollections were of vast open spaces strewn with every hue of purple and green. The farmhouse occupied a site reputed to be the highest point east of Russia, and across the valley, travelling further eastward and to a higher altitude, the backbone of England rose to meet an expanse of sky.

In those days the seasons were clearly defined. Winters with deep six foot drifts, which scaled the outbuildings, gave way to beautiful summers, each with their own charm. When the snow was deep, we relished winter sports. Sledges were useless because their thin runners cut into the soft drifts. Instead we used polythene bags, which we either sat or lay upon. They became popularly known as 'polly bags' and when the snow was deep enough to cover the walls so that one field blended into another, we called for the children who lived in the nearby cottage to 'go polly bagging'. It was my conviction that the modern flat plastic sledge was designed to cater for a sport we had invented.

I remember the summers too, with their long, light evenings which stretched interminably in front of my brother and I as we returned from school. On such occasions we changed into old jeans, sought out our father in the milking shed and, leaning on the solid concrete posts, begged to be given a job. Or, failing that, we set out to explore the nooks and crevices in the old quarry, which bit into the hillside below our house.

On reflection, it would be safe to say that my favourite sport was horse riding. When I was four years old, my father put me onto the shaggy Shetland pony and walked me round the farmyard. I shall never forget the thrill of that first ride as long as I live. The sensual feel of the warm beast beneath me sowed the seeds of an obsession that has never diminished. The subsequent rides, which schooled me in the skills of horsemanship, were, for the most part, tedious and not worthy of this tale. I would bore you if I described the bumps and bruises, falls and scrapes which toughened and cemented the desire to succeed: and succeed I did.

When proficient enough for a respectable hack, I rode with my mother who, although only marginally interested in horses, enjoyed a good, fast gallop. One of our favourite routes was along the straight road which ran on the edge of the high flats, down the bridle path skirting the reservoir and back via the old ruined barn. But we always avoided the huge pig farm on the outskirts of Hunters' Royd.

'Horses don't like pigs,' my mother explained on almost every ride. 'Everyone knows, they can't stand the sight or smell of them.' And, as if to prove the truth of her words, one evening she took me past the low concrete buildings with corrugated roofs which emitted sweet, sickly smells from their ventilators. Practically half-an-hour was spent in urging the stubborn beasts into the cart track beyond. My mother had made her point.

One soft summer evening when a red haze was beginning to shoot violent bloody vengeance over the western hills, I sauntered over to the stables, wondering whether there was sufficient time to saddle up and go for a quick hack. Immediately on reaching the outbuildings, I was arrested by a commotion in the field where the horses grazed. Puffing and panting I hurried through the stable block and the gate beyond into the field in time to see a light pink bundle rolling toward me. Before it reached the spot where I was standing it was overtaken by the two chestnut geldings, who neighed in excitement

as they kicked and tormented it. Intrigued to know what had incited such aggression, I ran full pelt toward the riot only to see the pinkish shape jump up and run for its life. But its legs were small compared to those of the horses, they overtook it and continued their bullying.

I was distraught. Although I approved of the horses, the same could not be said of their vindictive game. I called their names again and again but either they failed to hear or refused to listen.

I looked round desperately for assistance but there was no-one in sight. I ran to the farmhouse. 'Dad . . . Dad,' I called but the house was empty. At last I spied him in the distance, carrying wood into the barn. My spirits rose. I rushed towards him, calling and waving my arms. He put the wheelbarrow down, piled high with sawn-up logs, and shaded his eyes against the glare of the sun.

'Whatever's the matter?' he said, as my incoherent words tumbled one over the other.

'A – pig,' I gasped.

'A what?'

'A pig – come – and – help – it'll die!'

He shrugged his shoulders and with a puzzled frown, followed my lead to the scene of the riot. The horses were inflicting punishment on the unfortunate animal like those who take hostages from the scene of battle to slake on them their battle fever. The pig squealed in its misery and fear. Tears were rolling down my cheeks as I turned toward my father begging him to intervene.

Waving his arms in the air and shouting, he shooed the horses away. Then, walking over to the tiny twitching heap, he bent down and lifted the bruised animal, already half dazed with the incessant beating, and carried it away from its tormentors. He placed it in an empty outbuilding, laying it gently on a pile of straw. The pig grunted pitifully, exhausted but safe.

During the coming days, we spread news of the stray animal round the neighbouring farms but no-one confessed to losing a pig and because I had seen it first, it became mine. I learned to forgive the horses for their aggression. For, as I told myself, Everyone knows that horses are afraid of pigs.

I now had to bear all the responsibilities of parenthood – even to the extent of choosing a name. At school I had read a story about a pig called 'Wilber' so mine became 'Wilberetta'. Every day when I returned home, I would take her a bowl of pig feed and replenish her water supply. As I pushed open the door of her stall, her strong flat snout end twitched with curiosity then, with a squeak of excitement, she ran to me for a scratch behind the ear and a trough full of tasty morsels. If I held back the food, she would jump and twist in excitement as if dancing for her supper. I spent hours watching and playing with my loved one. Wilberetta was mine and I refused to let anyone else care for her.

Then one fateful morning, as I awoke and dressed, I was interrupted by a commotion outside the outbuildings. Rushing to the window, I stood on tiptoe and peered over the ledge to see our farm van drawn up outside Wilberetta's shed. For a moment I was paralysed with shock and disbelief. Could they be moving her and if so where to?

Stumbling down the stairs two at a time, I swung the front door wide open and ran as fast as I could across the yard and to the source of the commotion, then stood rigid with horror. The meaning of this intrusion had suddenly become clear. My parents were pushing and pulling Wilberetta, into their van. And that only spelt one thing!

'No, no, you mustn't take her away,' I shouted but my cries were drowned by Wilberetta's squeals. I pulled at my father's sleeve but he pushed me impatiently away. Inch by inch the condemned animal was manoeuvred into the van. The doors were slammed and the engine started. I sobbed bitterly as I watched them drive away. My father was taking away my friend.

A few days later, when Wilberetta returned in tiny pieces, my eyes were dry and I had learned to accept the ways of the world. Several days later, my mother served up roast pork and, with unspoken consent, we all conspired to taste the fruits of our treachery.

I will never forget that meal because something happened to me that changed my whole life. I experienced an extraordinary sense of responsibility as I partook of Wilberetta's flesh. She had died so that I could live. Her life was exchanged for mine and in that exchange, she had become part of me. It was with humility that I ate this sacred meal and, to this day, when eating the flesh of an animal, I am sobered by the thought that its death has become my life.