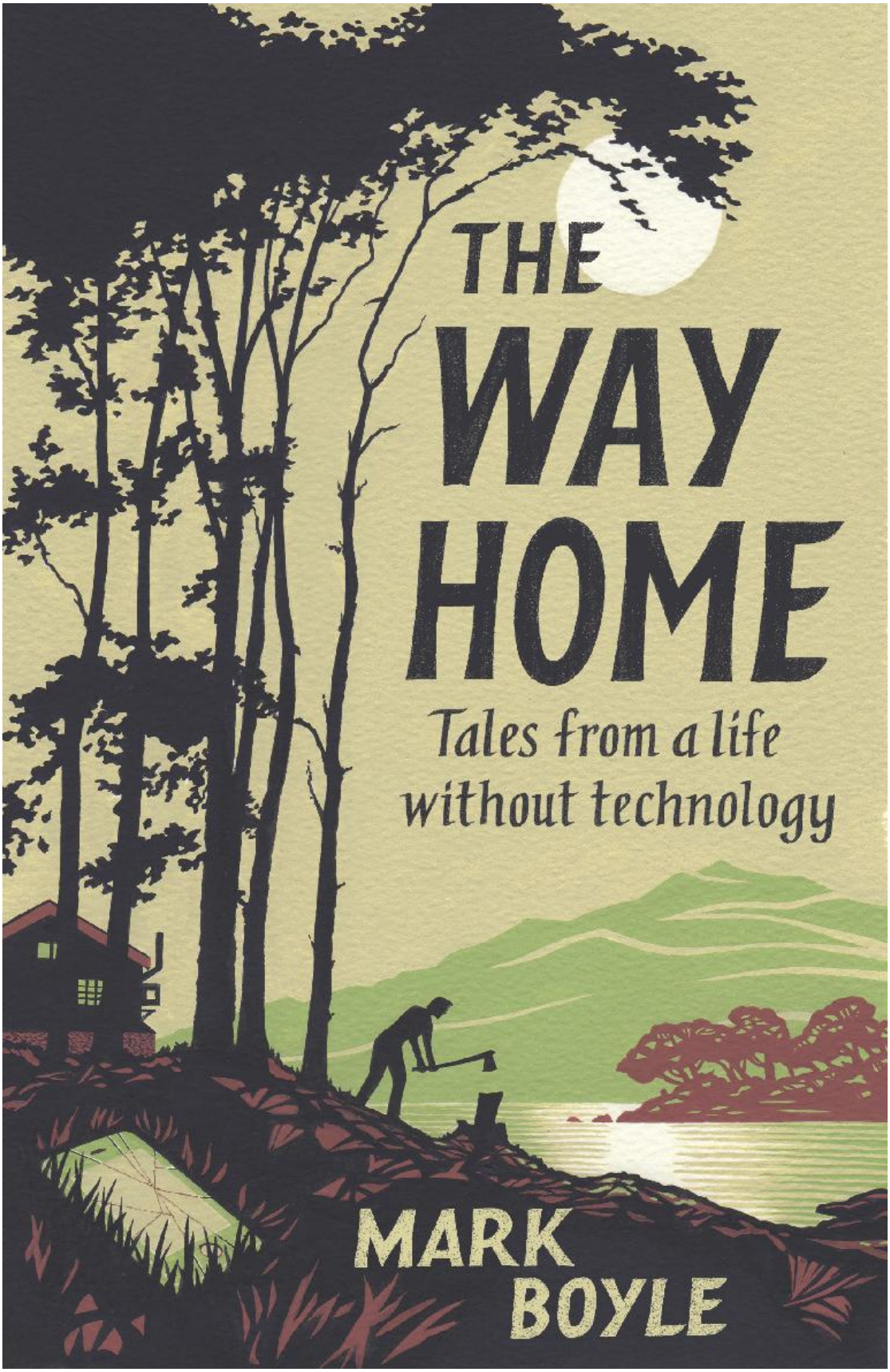
THE
WAY
HOME
Tales from a life
without technology
MARK
BOYLE

No running water, no car, no electricity or any of the things it powers: the internet, phone, washing machine, radio or light bulb.

Just a wooden cabin, on a smallholding, by the edge of a stand of spruce.

In this honest and lyrical account of a remarkable life without modern technology, Mark Boyle explores the hard-won joys of building a home with his bare hands, learning to make fi re, collecting water from the spring, foraging and fi shing.

What he fi nds is an elemental life, one governed by the rhythms of the sun and seasons, where life and death dance in a primal landscape of blood, wood, muck, water, and fi re – much the same life we have lived for most of our time on earth. Revisiting it brings a deep insight into what it means to be human at a time when the boundaries between man and machine are blurring.

Praise for *The Way Home*

'A beautiful and thought-provoking story that will inspire you to live differently. Mark asks the most fundamental questions then sets out to live the answers.'

Lily Cole

'Don't buy my books: buy this instead, while there's still time for you to change. This one matters. Boyle is the real thing: vital, angry, and

kind. And real things are terribly rare. You might think his ideas are dangerous, but in fact they represent the only possible safety.'

Charles Foster, author of *Being a Beast*

'Illustrates beautifully that giving up many of the things in life that we treat as indispensable may actually be less of a sacrifi ce than a liberation.'

Neil Ansell, author of *Deep Country*

' *The Way Home* paints a picture not only of how broken our culture has become, but of how to begin building a new one. It demands to be read – and then lived by.'

Paul Kingsnorth, author of

The Wake and *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist*

'In a world more connected than ever before we have never been so disconnected. Boyle takes us along with him on his experimental journey to reconnect, with himself and to the rhythms of the natural world around him. A thought-provoking read which encourages the reader to appreciate many of the things we take for granted.'

Megan Hine, author of *Mind of a Survivor*

Mark Boyle is the author of *The Moneyless Man*, *The Moneyless*

Manifesto and *Drinking Molotov Cocktails with Gandhi*, which have been translated into over twenty languages. A former business

graduate, he lived entirely without money for three years. He has written columns for the *Guardian* and has irregularly contributed to international press, radio and television. He lives on a smallholding in Co. Galway, Ireland.

The Way Home

Tales from a Life

Without Technology

Mark Boyle

A Oneworld Book

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For Kirsty Alston,

my mother, Marian Boyle, and my father, Josie Boyle

I am here not only to evade for a while the clamor and fi lth and confusion of the cultural apparatus but also to confront,

immediately and directly if it's possible, the bare bones of

existence, the elemental and fundamental, the bedrock which

sustains us. I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree,

a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself,

devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities, anti-Kantian, even

the categories of scientifi c description. To meet God or

Medusa face to face, even if it means risking everything human

in myself.

Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (1968)

Everything not saved will be lost.

Nintendo 'Quit Screen' message

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Author's Note

Throughout this book I speak of places that are of special signifi - cance to me. But this is not a travel book, nor an encouragement to explore far-off lands that bear no relevance to your own everyday experience of life. Anything but. Instead it's an invitation to immerse yourself in your own landscape, to foster an intimate relationship with it, to come to depend upon it; to fi nd your own place within your own place. This is work enough, believe me. As Patrick Kavanagh wrote in his essay 'The Parish and the Universe', 'To know fully even one fi eld or one land is a lifetime's experience.'

Woven into these pages is the story of one such place, the Great Blasket Island, and the lusty people who scratched a living from its sandy soil and turbulent seas until their evacuation in 1953. As this tale of connection, loss and hope unfolds outside the book's seasonal rhythm, I have italicised those passages that step beyond the landscape around my neck of the woods, Knockmoyle, and enter into the lost world of 'Blasket time'.

Books tend to have the unfortunate habit of attracting thought-less tourism to the places they reveal, the upshot of which can be the dilution of its essence and the particular things which made it worth writing about to begin with. If, for good reason, you still feel compelled to visit the places made known, all I ask is that you consider doing so in a way that their inhabitants, or the spirits that still haunt them, would welcome.

A U T H O R ' S N O T E

Places of character are full of characters, some of whom are human. All those I mention in this book are real, as are the stories and musings they imparted to me. To protect the privacy of my neighbours, however, I have given them fi ctitious names. On the

off-chance that one of them ever stumbles upon a dusty copy of this book, I am sure they'll recognise themselves, and a few of the other characters, and chuckle. No one else need care; except, that is, for the names and characters of their own neighbours – human, and non-human, alike.

Prologue

I have written minutely of much that we did, for it was my wish that somewhere there should be a memorial of it all, and I have done my best to set down the character of the people about me so that some record of us might live after us, for the likes of us will never be again.

Tomás Ó Criomhthain, *The Islandman* (1937)

The afternoon before I was set to begin living in a cabin, without electricity or any of the basic conveniences which, for most of my life, I had taken for granted – a phone, computer, light bulbs, washing machine, running water, television, power tools, gas cooker, radio – I received an email, perhaps the last I might ever receive, from an editor at a publishing house. He had read an article I had written for a newspaper, published earlier that day, and wanted to know if I would consider writing a book about my experiences.

One year before that, when I fi rst thought about building the cabin – the bedrock for what I hoped would be a simpler way of life – I came to the tough but realistic conclusion that, personal journals aside, I would probably never write again. I was told that publishers no longer accepted the hand-written manuscripts of D.H. Lawrence's time, especially from people who were no D.H. Lawrence; therefore my decision to start using less complex, more convivial tools was, I believed, a death knell to the only fi nancial livelihood I had. This I

accepted, as I had always maintained that, to borrow the words of nineteenth-century writer and transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, it is more important to 'stand up to live' than to 'sit down to write'. Still, the prospect weighed on my mind.

So his email came as a surprise. I told him that I was interested.

I had no idea at that point how it might work, if at all. For my entire adult life I had used computers to write everything from essays and theses to articles and books. I was already discovering that hand-writing was not only an entirely different craft to machine-writing, but that it involved a whole new way of think-ing. There would no longer be the speedy convenience of the

typed word or online research, no spellcheck, no copy and paste and no easy delete. If I needed to restructure a page , I would have to start over again. I wondered how editing might work without the instant communication that the modern publishing world has become accustomed to. My mind boggled. There were a hundred reasons why it might not work, so I picked up my pencil and set about making that ninety-nine instead.

~

Almost a decade before I decided to unplug myself from industrial civilisation, I began living without money for what was originally intended to be a one-year experiment. It ended up lasting three years, and money has played only a minor role in my life since. At this point, you're probably thinking that here is someone with acute masochistic tendencies. I could hardly blame you. Strangely, the opposite is closer to the truth. Phrases like 'giving up', 'living without' and 'quitting' are always in danger of sounding sacrifi cial, limiting and austere, drawing attention to the loss instead of to what might be gained. Alcoholics are more likely to

be described as ‘giving up the booze’ than ‘gaining good health and relationships’. In my experience, loss and gain are an ongoing part of all our lives. Choices, whether we know it or not, are always being made. Throughout most of my life, for reasons that made perfect sense, I chose money and machines, unconsciously choosing to live without the things which they replaced. The question concerning each of us then, one we all too seldom ask ourselves, is what are we prepared to lose, and what do we want to gain, as we fumble our way through our short, precious lives?

As also happened with this book, the afternoon before I was due to begin living without money – living with nature still sounds too cheesy – I was asked if I was interested in writing a book about my experiences. One year later it, and I, would become known as *The Moneyless Man*. It was the story of all the challenges, lessons, miracles, struggles, joys, mistakes and adventures I had experienced during my first year of moneyless living. In the process of writing that book, my editor asked me to write a short chapter clarifying the ‘rules of engagement’. As money is easily definable, the rules were straightforward: I couldn’t spend or receive a single penny for at least a year. Considering my motivations were ecological, geopolitical and social as much as personal, I went to stupid

lengths not to use the fruits of a global monetary system I was trying to live without. Ultimately, however, my self-imposed limitations were relatively clear and simple: no money.

So when the editor who first contacted me about the book you are now reading asked me to clarify the rules of my life without technology, it must have seemed a reasonable request, yet I instantly felt uneasy about it. Unlike money, it's not easy to draw a clear line in the sand in relation to what constitutes technology and what doesn't. Language, fire, a smartphone, an axe – even the pencil I write these words with – could all be described as

technology, though I shy away from using such a rough brush to paint life. Where I would draw the line – the Stone Age? The Iron Age? The eighteenth century? – became an impossible question when the words themselves could be considered technology; and the more I reflected on my years without money, the less important finding the perfect answer seemed to become.

On top of that, those years taught me that rules have a tendency to set your life up as a game to win, a challenge to overcome, creating the kind of black-and-white scenarios our society leans

towards. My life is my life, and it's prone to the same contradiction, complexity, compromise, confusion and confl ict as the next person's. My ideals are often one step ahead of my ability to fully embody them, and that is no bad thing; in fact, as we will see later on, I wonder if hypocrisy might be the highest ideal of all.

I felt strongly that, if I were to write a book about my experiences, it ought to mirror what was the real point of unplugging: to deeply explore what it means to be human – in all its beautiful complexities, contradictions and confusions – when you strip away the distractions, the things that disconnect us from what is immediately around us.

Ten years on, I feel more drawn towards honestly exploring the complexities of simplicity, and less inclined towards being right. At the heart of how I live is the burning desire to discover what it might feel like to become a part of one's landscape, using only tools and technologies (if I must call them that) which, like the Old Order Amish people of North America, do not make me beholden to institutions and forces that have no regard for the principles and values on which I wish to live my life. And then, as life inevitably pulls me further afi eld – away from the hard-won

simplicity of the cabin and the smallholding and into a society that seems to become more enthralled by virtual reality by the minute,

to be free to recount the compromises and dilemmas I face, frankly and straightforwardly. Insofar as there are rules to my life, this is as much as I can say.

Within the limitations of words to accurately describe reality, the fi rst chapter of this book intends to give you a fl avour of the landscape which I am attempting to become a part of, and the cabin within which my new life began. The rest takes you through the seasons as I strip away the distractions whose convenience, I've come to believe, is killing us in more ways than one. Therefore the pages that follow are not so much the story of a man living without technology as they are a collection of observations, practicalities, conversations over farmyard gates, adventures and refl ections, which I hope will provide an insight into the life of someone attempting to pare the extravagance of modernity back to the raw ingredients of life.

Actually, now that I think of it, this book has very little to do

with me at all.

Knowing My Place

Would I a house for happiness erect,

Nature alone should be the architect.

Abraham Cowley, ‘Horace to Fuscus Aristius. A Paraphrase

Upon the 10th Epistle of the First Book of Horace' (1668)

'This is the most beautiful place on earth,' remarked American writer Edward Abbey in his opening line of *Desert Solitaire*. For him that was the Canyonlands, the slickrock desert around Moab, Utah. But it was a title, Abbey knew himself, which had – and ought to have – no end of claims to it.

Such claims have been most vocal in the US. According to the poet and essayist Wendell Berry, heaven is Henry County in Kentucky, where he has farmed and stayed put while the rest of his generation, as Roger Deakin once put it, has been 'playing musical chairs' around him. There his tools of choice are a team of horses and a pencil. The conservationist Aldo Leopold probably felt the same about his shack on a sand farm in Wisconsin. To Henry David Thoreau, that place would have been Walden Pond for the two years, two months and two days he lived by its shore. For wilderness guardian John Muir, God's country was more expansive: the Sierras of the American West, from Alaska to the Yosemite Valley all the way to Mexico, where he searched out truths and challenged conventional wisdoms while 'carrying only

a few crusts of bread, a tin cup, a small portion of tea, a notebook and a few scientifi c instruments'.

Over here, on my side of the Atlantic, Peig Sayers and Tomás Ó Criomhthain could have echoed Abbey's words on the Great Blasket Island, which is stranded 5 kilometres off Ireland's Dingle Peninsula and is the home of one of the most surprising, and forgotten, literary sub-genres of the early twentieth century. Over eighty books were written about or by these Blasket Islanders (though few are still in print), no small compliment considering only 150 people lived there in its heyday.

Why the interest? Who knows. Perhaps intrigue, perhaps anthropological voyeurism or perhaps a sign of a generation who had lost something important and were told that it was last seen there.

To me, the most beautiful place on earth is this unsophisticated, half-wild three-acre smallholding in the middle of somewhere unimportant. It is here I wish to stake my own claim.

~

I landed on this smallholding in the summer of 2013, along with my girlfriend at the time, Jess, and a close friend called Tom. We

were full of energy and bold, often unrealistic, ideas. After a decade living in England, the call to move back to Ireland was strong. I had missed my family, the people and the nuances of the culture. I had been away long enough for my Donegal accent to fade and for other Irish people to wonder where I was from. I was starting to wonder myself.

This was the fi rst smallholding we had looked at. It was about as far from prime agricultural land as you could imagine, but it felt unpretentious, a place that was happy just to be itself. I

remember, as we went to view the place, being struck by the gentleness of its atmosphere – the rustle of breeze on leaves, the hee-haw of a donkey, the coo of a dove – as we turned off the ignition in our camper van and walked up the track to where the potato fi eld is now. The fallowness of the land seemed to me like it had important lessons to teach, lessons that might involve listening. We met a few of the more curious neighbours by the farm gate, and they were open, mischievous and warm. The air was alive with fresh manure, and we found it all strangely

alluring.

As endearing as any of its qualities was the fact we could afford it. Ireland was in the aftermath of the 2008 fi nancial meltdown, and we were offered the smallholding, and the farmhouse that came with it, for a rock-bottom price. My gain had been another man's loss. What could I do? Our budget was tight – stupidly tight – but I knew that having little or no money would mean that we'd have to get creative, and that this limitation could ultimately be our greatest ally.

We got to work immediately. We fi xed up the house and converted living spaces into bedrooms, so that more people could live here. We planted trees, lots of them, while in other places we pollarded trees to let in light to the orchard and vegetable gardens we began to grow. The land was wet, so we dug out drains with our spades. We acquired a fl ock of hens, built a coop, planted a nuttery, created a pond, grew a herb garden, scoured car boot sales and junk yards for good quality, inexpensive hand tools that, for the sellers, were long-since obsolete. We made compost bins, composting toilets and, eventually, compost. We built a reciprocal-framed fi re-hut that would quickly become

a focal point for music, dancing and terrible hangovers. We only had a couple of months to get wood in and dry for winter. We

scythed every blade of overgrown wildness in an unconscious attempt to put our own mark on the land, something I would later regret.

As I was also writing another book at the time, the workload took its toll on my relationship with Jess, which was already complicated by the fact that she wanted kids and I didn't, and we parted as good friends. I stayed here and she moved to County Cork. I promised myself I would never again put anything above a relationship, but I also knew that old habits die hard.

By the end of the fi rst year I thought the hard work was done. What I have learned since is that the hard work is never done, especially when you reject all the things that fool you into thinking that self-reliant lives are meant to be simple.

~

I fi rst met Kirsty in an enthralling, picturesque place called Schumacher College in Devon. Founded in 1990, it was named

after the British economist E.F. Schumacher, best remembered for the classic book *Small is Beautiful*. She had been running a café at Alby Crafts and Gardens in Norfolk, where she was born and bred, but had slowly come to the conclusion that business wasn't adding anything to her own bottom line: happiness. Most of the time she found herself stressed, working every hour God sent and wondering what the hell she was doing it all for.

I was running a week-long course called 'Wild Economics' with a friend, the wild food forager Fergus Drennan, and she had come on it to explore other ways of making a living, ways that required little or no money. She had only decided to join the course at the last minute. It was a decision that was to have the most unexpected results.

We clicked instantly. I would fi nd myself scanning the canteen, on breaks between sessions, looking to see if there was an empty seat beside her. We would stay up late talking, putting the world to rights. Her wide, deep brown eyes had a distinct sense of wonder that made you want to be in her company. We quickly fell in love.

I once read that 'love is the recognition of beauty'. I saw many

beautiful qualities in her – she was kind, playful, thoughtful, generous, she stood up for the people and things she cared about – that I had never encountered alongside such honesty before, and I felt blessed to have met her.

Within months we had begun creating a life together here.

Neither of us had any idea how it was going to work. Kirsty was a wanderer who followed her heart, a dancer and performer who ran venues at festivals like Glastonbury. She had been wanting to live in a healthy relationship with the natural world, but had never before attempted to live directly from her immediate landscape and was uncertain about how she might fi nd it. I was the stable, rooted sort who thought that mega-festivals like Glastonbury were an ecological travesty. But as every wild river needs solid banks, we felt that our differences could complement each other. Time would tell.

At that moment, all I did know was that I loved her, and that I would love her until my last breath, no matter how things would unfold.

~

Kirsty and I had been living in the farmhouse for almost a year

when we decided to build the cabin. As I had previously lived in a 12-by-6-foot caravan for three years in England, living in a farmhouse felt luxurious at fi rst. But I soon found that its conveniences

– switches, buttons, automation, sockets – were holding me back and discouraging me from learning the skills I wanted to learn and which I felt were an important part of the future, or mine at least. With electrically pumped running water on tap, I never bothered to walk to the spring.

In the farmhouse I found it diffi cult to look real life square in the eye, when electricity, fossil fuels and factories were taking care of it all for me. Having too much convenience is certainly a First World problem, but that doesn't make it any less of a problem, or one whose reverberations aren't felt in every nook and cranny of the planet. In the caravan I'd had a strong, direct relationship with the landscape around it, but now I felt like I was living vicariously through a seductive array of generic, functional gadgets. It occurred to me that perhaps the law of diminishing returns applied to comfort too, and that in the unceasing trade-off between

comfort and the feeling of being fully alive, I was failing to fi nd the right balance.

I wanted to feel alive again. Kirsty felt the same, though she articulated the urge to do so in her own way. We decided to let out the farmhouse, rent-free, to an eclectic collection of heretics – a yogi, two sailors, an anarchist, a circus performer and a musician – who wanted to live on the land, too. They all had their own reasons for wanting to be here, but a common thread connecting us was the feeling, understood in different ways, that something was deeply wrong with modern society, and that somehow we needed to reconnect with the natural world again, as much for our own sake as for nature's. This more collective approach to smallholding had been the vision for the place from day one.

With the cabin plans drawn up, the realities of the often-romanticised, so-called simple life were hitting home, the prospect

of which aroused mixed feelings. We intended to be in and unplugged by winter, but fi rst there was the small matter of build-

ing the cabin.

~

Sunday evening. It had taken me all week to dig out and level the foundations for the cabin. Twenty tonnes of hillside, shifted by spade. Just as I was clearing up for the night and thinking of a hot shower – might as well, while you still can, my body argued – a friend called over for a game of chess, his usual elaborate excuse for a glass of unusual wine (oak leaf on this occasion) and a chat. He said that he had heard that I was giving up technology, or something like that. Depends on what you mean by technology, I replied, but yeah, something like that.

He seemed genuinely concerned, not so much for me as for our friendship. How were we going to meet up? The same way we once did, I told him. Curious, he questioned me on the fi ner details – Email? Fridge? Internet access at the library? Clock? Running water? Gas? Public pay phones? Chainsaw? Wind-up radio? – to which I, in various ways, said no. As the conversation went on – it wasn't the fi rst time I'd had it – he looked quite concerned for my welfare, too.

We've known each other since childhood, but there was a big gap in the middle, during which time we had taken different paths. He asked me why on earth I would do that to myself. Enjoy life, he said.

But that was the problem. I had stopped enjoying life. On one level I was enjoying blenders and toasters and once-unimaginable power, but I wasn't enjoying life.

8

K N O W I N G M Y P L A C E

I told him that I wanted to put my fi nger on the pulse of life again. I wanted to feel the elements in their enormity, to strip away the nonsense and lick the bare bones of existence clean. I wanted to know intimacy, friendship and community, and not just the things that pass for them. I wanted to search for truth to see if it existed and, if it didn't, to at least fi nd something closer to my own. I wanted to feel cold and hunger and fear. I wanted to live, and not merely to exhibit the signs of life; and then, when the time came, to be ready to go off into the woods, calmly and clearly, and let the life there feed on my fl esh and bones, just as I had done on theirs. Crows eating out my eyes,

a fox gnawing at my face, a feral dog chewing on my bones, a pine marten making good use of my leg meat. It only seems fair.

While all of that was true, I kept the more important ecological, geopolitical, social and cultural reasons to myself. God knows, I could have offered up a few: the mass extinction of species; widespread surveillance in our bedrooms and pockets; resource wars; cultural imperialism; the standardisation of everything; the colonisation of wilderness and indigenous lands; the fragmentation of community; climate catastrophe; the automation of millions of jobs, and the inevitable inequality, unemployment and purposelessness that will ensue (providing fertile ground for demagogues to take control); the stark decline in mental health; the rise in industrial-scale illnesses such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes, depression, auto immune diseases and obesity; the tyranny of fast-paced, relentless communication; or the addictiveness of the hollow excitement (fi lms, pornography, TV, new products, celebrity gossip, dating websites and 24/7 news) that exists behind our screens, the goal of which seems to be the monetisation of our distraction. Etc.

But no one really wants to hear those – they're too preachy, too negative, too true – and so I poured us both another glass of wine instead.

After only a handful of moves we decided to abandon the game of chess, and re-corked the bottle of wine for another evening. He had to be up at 6 a.m. for work, and I had to start gathering round wood poles for the cabin.

~

It had been a tough-but-rewarding day. My feet were begging to get out of their boots, my back was glistening with salty sweat, my mind was clear and at peace. But the day had a bit to go yet. The sun was slowly cooling, so I took my neighbour's dog for a walk and went wandering in the woods, searching for the following day's building materials. I must have been gone a while, for both the light and my legs were beginning to fade, when I came upon exactly what I had been rummaging around for, every evening, for weeks. It was laid out so perfectly I wondered if it had been patiently waiting for me.

Stretching out 13 metres, the tree had, from what I could tell, blown over in the remorseless storms two winters earlier, its shallow roots unable to withstand one of the most tumultuous seasons Ireland had seen in many years. Having been suspended shoulder-height off the forest fl oor by a couple of neighbouring beeches, it was seasoning nicely.

Being a Sitka spruce, it was as straight as anything gets in the natural world, meaning it was tailor-made for what I needed: a roundwood ridge pole for the cabin, under which we hoped to spend our days. It was the combination of these qualities that persuaded me that it was fi nally time to round up an eight-strong

crew of sylvan pallbearers to help bestow on it the respect that all life deserves.

That was the upside. The downside was that we had to get this cumbersome log out of the woods and down to where the cabin was growing up out of what grew around it. That involved carrying it up and down wet, boggy furrows for 300 metres, over an old stone wall, across a road and through an acre of copse to its fi nal

resting place. Even seasoned it weighed as heavy as an unkind remark, and all we had for the job were hands, shoulders, knees and pigheadedness.

But that was the deal.

~

Taking it slowly, half an arm's length at a time, Kirsty, a friend and I raised the ridge pole 4 metres into its new home, resting on top of a timber frame that would eventually give structure to lime-rendered, straw bale walls. Its sheer mass asked hard questions of every muscle, ligament and doubt in our bodies. As it should. We were told that some heavy machinery with forks could have done the job in half the time, and with just one person. But it felt good, important even, to raise this centrepiece together.

Over the following weeks, the roof took shape; sawn spruce boards with waney edges were overlapped above young, thinned-out spruce rafters, on top of which went the topsoil that we had dug out from the foundations a month earlier. Into this we broad-casted a wildfl ower-and-grass seed mix which, when they grew and blossomed, would blend the cabin gently into the landscape.

For all their beauty, wild roofs are not straightforward. One

afternoon I climbed up onto the roof to fi x a minor drainage

problem. Looking around from that vantage point I could see the

pattern of the place for the fi rst time. It was a tightly woven fabric

of people, wildlife, streams, fi elds, insects, trees, rocks and plants of which I was but one thread, no more or less important than the

others. This place was no silk robe – it was more like the kind of

Aran sweater that fi shermen wear, but it felt hand-crafted, home-

spun, rough around the edges and full of warmth. Sitting up there

on the roof, surveying the landscape anew, I found a fresh sense of

appreciation for this forgotten place in which I was slowly sending

down roots.

Nestled in, as I was, among the dunnocks, bullfi nches and

robins perched in the alveoli of an old beech whose canopy

partially sheltered the cabin's roof, my mind couldn't help but

map the landscape around me. As I did so, I felt my own sense of

self diminish within it.

To my right, as I faced the afternoon sun, lay our vegetable

garden which, once our cabin-building was complete – would that

ever happen? – was ready to provide us with roots, leaves, beans, courgettes and anything else that might do well in this soil and climate. When we fi rst arrived here this patch had gone wild, or what is commonly called ‘overgrown’. There had been a poly-tunnel on the spot below me, until we took it down and gave it to a friend, a market gardener who, despite thinking we had gone mad, was delighted to make use of it. I had two reasons for this. One, I no longer wanted to build dependencies on technologies whose manufacture I felt showed no respect for life. Two, both Kirsty and I wanted to live on an Irish diet – what this land can naturally provide without recourse to things like plastic – for better or for worse. We wouldn’t be long fi nding out, but we were under no illusion that it would be easy, especially in times of great biospheric change.

K N O W I N G M Y P L A C E

It was this overgrown vegetable garden that had convinced me to move here in the fi rst place. I remember the fi rst moment I snuck my way into it through a shaded, secluded track arced by sweet chestnut, elder and hawthorn, where I came eye-to-eye with

a handsomely fed stag who had been freely munching on wild-
fl owers, grass and blackberries.

Considering that I ate a vegan diet at the time, and had always admired this fi ne beast's kin, I could not have known, as he stood there proudly in the reddish hue of an August sunset, that I would one day kill, skin and butcher some of his kind so that I, and the small woods I had planted, could live.

Right then I just stared in awe; of his form, his vitality, his gentleness and of that untameable look in his eye. It wouldn't be until a year later, when I would read Aldo Leopold's essay 'Thinking Like a Mountain' and attempt to live from these lands myself, that my thoughts on life and death would change dramatically.

~

On the opposite side of the cabin sits our hostel, The Happy Pig, which I built, during my second year here, out of local materials using natural building techniques, such as cob and cordwood, wattle and daub, roundwood and sawn spruce, and where visitors can stay for free. It is run in the spirit of a bothy, and it sometimes doubles or triples up as an event space and a *sibín* – a traditionally illicit pub made licit by the fact that any homebrew is served gratis.

Through word of mouth alone it has become a halfway house,

sanctuary or retreat for countless people who, for various reasons, long for reconnection with wilder places, or with the wild within themselves. We originally considered creating a website for it, but we were already too busy as it was, and I no longer wanted to go

down that road anyway. There's got to be somewhere, after all, that isn't on the internet.

Head east past this hostel, through the nuttery and the potato fi eld, and you come to the home of my nearest neighbour, Packie: a small white bungalow built in the 1950s to house rural bachelors. Packie is one of a dying breed of character, an endangered species who has that roguish glint in the eye you can only get away with when you hit your sixties. His face, like this place he never leaves, is well-weathered, showing all the signs of laughter and regret. What's left of his white hair is usually wild, except on Sundays, when you would barely recognise him.

I recall, on one of the fi rst days after I moved here, having to write an article about 'gift culture' – a dry term anthropologists use to describe the myriad ways in which the fi rst peoples organ-

ised themselves without money or barter – for a newspaper I've long since forgotten the name of. I spent all morning and afternoon working on the article, tapping plastic buttons to extol the many virtues of this natural form of economy.

The following morning, as I went to stretch my legs and get the lie of the land, I noticed that the fi eld of grass I had scythed a few days earlier had been mysteriously cocked into neat mounds of hay. No one seemed to know how until the next day, when a rumour slowly got around that Packie, whom I had not properly met at that point, had been seen in our fi eld, hay fork in hand, before the sun had even come up over his house.

He hadn't said a word to anyone.

~

To the south of the cabin grows a young orchard of apples, autumn olives, plums, sea buckthorn berries, pears, quinces, redcurrants

and cherries, with some other useful plants like fl ax dotted here and there. Not all enjoy the poor-draining clay soil that defi nes life in these parts. Keep walking through this orchard and you eventu-

ally come to a quiet road – except, that is, at around 8:30 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. – which separates our smallholding from a stand of twenty-year-old spruce, itself bordered by a thin, deceptive belt of native broadleaves and an old thick stone wall of a pre-revolution, aristocratic estate.

This forest – perhaps ‘tree farm’ is a more apt term – was planted by man with timber and bottom lines in mind, yet it still has a distinct sense of wildness about it. It provides good homes for red squirrels, pine martens, hen harriers and wood mice (an important food source for native predators here). Just beyond my sightline were the places I would soon be foraging in with intent, skulking around picking sorrel, burdock root, chanterelles and wild raspberries. It is no cornucopia – few man-made forests in temperate climates are – but if you know where to look and what to look for, going for a walk with the dog can become part of your livelihood.

~

On all other sides, we’re surrounded by fields of grass and tufts of dark green rush, the latter hinting at the clay beneath. This area is commonly considered to be marginal land, but I