



Escape to Captivity

A wanted and a wanting man

John MacBeath



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Chapter 1 Sans regret

Non, je ne regrette rien. Every time I listen to that Edith Piaf lament I am taken back to that chance encounter with the man who called himself Willy Laing. And although I sometimes wish I had never met him and everything which followed from that coincidence, I do not regret the painful lessons I learned from the most enigmatic of men. If it were not for him, were it not for Willy Laing, I would never have visited Breendonck. I would never have learned the history that school never taught me, never have understood the depths to which inhumanity may reach, and the resilience of the human spirit.

My path to Breendonck and the chain of subsequent events might never have occurred were it not for the deprivations of single sex schooling and my falling helplessly in love with the first girl to show an interest in me. My future would certainly have taken a different path had I not lived in the cloistered world of a Brethren family and frustrated attempts to escape its uncompromising sanctions.

Many years later I would write about total institutions and parallels between my captive upbringing and the most inappropriately named concentration 'camps'. For my parents, at least my father, there was only one version of reality, the lamentable nature of fallen humanity, the counterpoint of good and evil, sin and redemption.

While aware that a second sex existed there were few occasions for intercourse of any kind, mother, aunts and cousins apart. Sunday was the only occasion in which I was able to enjoy the briefest of encounters with the elusive gender. And so, with a restricted field to choose

from, I decided to fall in love with the first girl to acknowledge my presence. It took me four weeks of agonised frustration before I at last found the courage to approach Avril, daughter of the manse, and to boldly suggest that we might go somewhere or do something together, although clearly nothing that might be deemed forward or inappropriate.

I assumed from her reaction that Avril had never been propositioned before. She seemed puzzled that this strange, and not altogether fetching, adolescent should wish to 'walk out' with her and with what intent? She would have to ask her father, of course. It was two weeks before the assent was forthcoming but attended by a question to which I could not answer with all honesty.

'What would you like to do?'

'We could go to Kelvingrove park', I suggested as this was apparently what Glaswegians did on Saturdays, weather permitting.

And so began a series of very brief and very awkward interludes, surprisingly sanctioned by my father because, as a daughter of an upstanding Christian minister, her other worldliness and chastity would be beyond doubt. As there was never a question of a visit to the cinema or other forbidden venues, there was no outlet for the place for the growing frustration which I took with me to my bed every night. My father's advice, which I did find puzzling at the time, was to take a small cloth to tuck into my pyjamas. I'm sure this was a reference to spontaneous emissions during sleep rather than to the sin of masturbation.

My fellow pupils were an unending source of disinformation. The most adventurous of literature, daringly brought into the bicycle sheds behind the

playground, was a *Health and Efficiency* magazine for naturists, showing women playing volleyball with normally concealed body parts unashamedly displayed. So sordid was this literature that it resulted in the purveyor of this filth, one Gordon Macniven, being suspended from school, never to return, choosing Australia and an assisted passage as the most obvious alternative to schooled captivity. We owed him a debt of gratitude as first period Maths was replaced by an ad hoc assembly in which the whole school was treated to a lengthy treatise on sexual depravity.

Avril, equally condemned to a single sex school and strict admonition as to the dangers of patent leather shoes which reflected your knickers, was apparently even more deprived than I of sexual intelligence. The female discourse was, apparently at a less basic and at a more romantic, level. So, with little discussion or exploration of the most basic of human communion our chaste and short love affair was destined to remain contractually bound by a combination of innocence and ignorance until one day she discovered the joys of sex. But not with me.

My life had now become, very obviously, no longer worth living and, after a prolonged period of remorse and a literal loss of appetite, I laid out the stark alternatives. I would do what jilted lovers have done in the best romantic tradition, run away to sea or find my way to Australia to join my errant school friend Macniven who had left school in the most unpropitious of circumstances. I could not have anticipated that my planned itinerary would take me to one of the least well known but most cruel concentration camps that was

Breendonck and a tortured captor whose story would change my life forever.

Chapter 2 A summer in captivity

Still resentful of my deficient education and the loss of my first true love, I left home. I lied to my parents that I would be back in six weeks to continue my education. I was to soon realise that my real education was about to begin. Virtually penniless save for the three pounds I had shamefully removed from my father's suit jacket, I decided to hitchhike the whole way to Clacton-on-Sea where I would be employed as a dishwasher in Butlin's holiday camp. If I had any pretension to being a red coat or a blue coat (the highest status of roles in that sad kingdom) I was disappointed to find myself at the other end of the social spectrum. I was allocated to the most menial of tasks, morning, lunchtime and evening shifts in the kitchen, removing what was left of the only partly consumed fare, the reconstituted mash, overcooked cabbage and inexplicable beetroot. The unsocial hours left very little time for any other less tedious pursuits.

When I passed through the gates of Butlin's for the first time I entered another world. I had read *Animal Farm* (prescribed third form reading), immersed myself in science fiction books and movies, but here I was living the sensation of actually visiting another planet. This was a world with its own mores, its own cultural norms, its ritual observance of conventions that became so embedded in habit that if there was a real world out there it had been forgotten within days of captivity. As prisoners develop their own repertoire of jokes and story-telling, so among the staff we joked about being POWs (Prisoners of William Butlin) devising elaborate schemes for escape.

It was much later, having visited Breendonck that I began to draw parallels between two kinds of 'camps', both purpose-built, self contained, with their own daily rituals, yet with one essential difference - one designed to entertain, the other to degrade and humiliate, although that is perhaps, a questionable distinction. My familiarity with prison camps until then had been owed to my insatiable appetite for movies and a whole genre of boys own adventures - *Stalag 17*, *The Colditz Story*, *The Wooden Horse*, *The Great Escape* and the long running *Hogan's Heroes*. The latter with their comical and rather loveable captors, made me wonder why anyone would wish to risk their lives by escaping from these rather collegial places.

Given our extended sentence in this enclosed world, the proximity and intensity of relationships was bound to lead to diverse forms of sexual gratification. I was introduced to the conventions of three, five and seven minute lust. These meetings of sexual congress were almost exclusively among the staff, casual and ritual, to be left behind once the last happy camper had departed and the gates had closed for another season.

I was the exception to the rule. I was an incurable romantic, or perhaps still too constrained by a deeply embedded Calvinistic ethic to 'play the field', as I was advised by my more worldly-wise inmates. And so it was that I met my conservative female counterpart. She went by the wholly unfortunate name of Judy Didcock, providing endless variations on a theme among the natives. As in 1970s England 'cock' was also a common form of address, an innocuous greeting could be easily misconstrued.

The concept of a somatotype was something I was yet to learn but my ideal of feminine beauty was owed to my infatuation with June Allison. Perhaps this was because she was the first film star I had ever come across, in the first film I had covertly seen, unbeknownst to my parents, *The Glenn Miller Story*. Judy Didcock fell most perfectly into that same mould. For nearly four weeks we pursued our chaste relationship, as much due to Judy's strict boundary management as to my own inhibitions and risk of rejection. She was to escape captivity a week before me but not without extracting the promise that I would visit her in Trumpington, a small village a few miles south of Cambridge.

As luck would have it, I shared a chalet with someone who claimed to be a psychiatrist, although in hindsight I wonder if it was a surreal identity in that most surreal of worlds. Cyril was employed as a security consultant without ever having to deal with a security issue. This, he attributed to his ability to 'hold the four corners of the room', elevating himself above the madding crowd, anticipating and pre-empting any potential disturbance. He introduced me to the work of Jacob Kounin which he suggested, would be a good source if I ever became a teacher, or for that matter, a barman or perhaps, night club bouncer. 'With-it-ness', he explained, was Kounin's word to describe the ability to know what was going on at all times in prison, pub or classroom, scanning the room, alert to any sign of incipient bad behaviour. The signal mistake made by the novice teacher was, he said, the failure to intervene early, to threaten or to promise rather than acting incisively to pre-empt dissidence. Having established that presence and authority it was not then necessary for

the teacher to always know what was going on, but for the students to perceive that the teacher knows.

Cyril introduced me to another powerful concept that has also stayed with me ever since. Every time I enter a lift, stand at a bus stop, attend a football match, I remember Cyril's long treatises on behaviour settings. Butlin's was the perfect laboratory for studying the phenomenon of behaviour settings. Watch and learn, advised Cyril. Observe with new eyes as each new wave of conscripts passes through the gates. They tell the same jokes, sing the same songs, trip over the same obstacles, get drunk at allotted times, return their liquid meals to the same pavements at predicted hours, and then with the dawn of a new day produce a repeat performance. Perhaps the producers of the movie *Groundhog Day* had Butlin's in mind when they wrote the script, casting Bill Murray as the hapless victim condemned to re-live the same day over and over again.

In the few leisure hours that my slave labour allowed me, I would lie on my bunk, with Cyril treating me to lengthy discourses on social psychology and the nature of 'insight', which he explained as looking beneath the surface to better understand the roots of behaviour. Many years, even decades later, I still recall these words that became deeply embedded in my memory. 'We must learn to know what we see rather than seeing what we already know.'

Cyril introduced me to Plato and his allegory of the cave in which prisoners, shackled since birth, to face only the cave wall, mistake the interplay of shadows on the cave wall for reality. It made a lasting impression on me as I became aware of my own shadowy existence and a world to which I now longed to escape.

Chapter 3 Re-entry

After six weeks in the cave that was Butlin's the challenges of re-entry into what we know as the 'real' world took me by surprise. Going into a real newsagent shop to buy a real newspaper left me struggling for the correct form of address and the appropriate tenor of conversation. The indulgent attitude of the shopkeeper told me that she was quite accustomed to dealing with visitors from another planet.

I knew even then how shameful it was to deceive my parents into thinking this was my holiday job rather than the first stage on my round-the-world journey but I was resolute in my determination to run away. More exotic destinations would have to wait while I honoured my promise to Judy to visit the most unlikely sounding Trumpington.

In our many close encounters of the chaste kind Judy had never told me about her family, the village in which she lived or the close proximity of her home to Grantchester and to Cambridge. Finding the modest home in the village centre and knocking expectantly on the front door I was on the verge of being embraced when Judy became aware of her father standing behind her and, with a show of formality, earnestly shook my hand.

I decided within the first minute that I was not going to like her father. It was obvious that he had reluctantly agreed to my visit and to my occupation of the spare room. It was at a remove from Judy's by virtue of the intervening parental bedroom, guarding any illicit passage. At the dinner table I was placed far enough away from her so that no unseemly touching could take

place under the table. Dinner conversation took the form of a monologue on the deteriorating state of the nation, the perils for young people growing up in this sex-obsessed and anarchic society. I think he might have got on famously with my father. Judy's mother played the role of the forgiving, indulgent wife to perfection, only occasionally offering a tentative, 'Are you really sure of that, Derek?'

To my relief, swiftly following a rather uninspiring dinner, he, now known to be Derek, moved to the adjacent sitting room from which we could hear his remonstrations with the television, most probably berating an insufferable Labour politician. We dutifully repaired to the kitchen, offering, not without hidden motive, to free Mrs Didcock from doing the dishes, but she would not entertain such an idea, either out of practised courtesy or to maintain vigilance over her only and much prized offspring.

It wasn't until after breakfast the next morning that I found myself alone with Judy. Derek Didcock had left for the office where he would no doubt be the butt of similar improvisations on his surname. Mrs Didcock was just 'popping round to the shops.' 'Only for a few minutes', she was keen to emphasise, signalling that there was not enough time for us to consummate our relationship in the guest bedroom.

It was a spectacular early autumn morning. We had a free pass for the day but with strict instructions to be back before tea when he who must be obeyed would be expectantly home from the office. It was a short walk from the Didcock home to Grantchester about which I had very little, if any, prior knowledge. But I was to be

'educamated', as Judy informed me, by a visit to the Orchard.

As we walked hand in hand I was subjected to a series of rhetorical questions:

Did I know that Granchester has the world's highest concentration of Nobel prize winners?

'Funnily enough, no.'

Did I know that there is said to be an underground passage which runs from the Old Manor house to King's College Chapel more than two miles away?

'I'm afraid that wasn't one of the exam questions at my school', I confessed.

'Well, did they teach you anything at your school about Rupert Brooke?'

I had heard the name but it meant nothing to me. Judy shook her head in mock disgust. I would know a lot more before I left. But before ten to three when I would be formally introduced to the life and work of Richard Brooke, we would 'simply have to' visit the Orchard.

The Orchard is everything you would expect of an orchard, a few acres of still green apple trees, the blossoms long since shed. Under the shelter of these gnarled and aging trees you could recline in a deckchair while balancing a cream tea on your knee, listening to the birdsong, rising above the low earnest conversations, disquisitions by Cambridge academics entertaining (or maybe boring) their diligent audiences.

Among the many prestigious visitors who have graced these very tables I was distantly acquainted with only two, Bertrand Russell and Virginia Woolf, and the latter only because I had seen the film with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. It was a film I had gone to see only because I had had a vicarious relationship with

Elizabeth Taylor from the moment she made her entrance on the stairs in *Elephant Walk*.

I should have known about John Maynard Keynes, Augustus John, Ludwig Wittgenstein and E.M. Forster. Either they had been bypassed on the congested school curriculum or I had simply not been paying attention at the time. Which would not have been unusual. 'John, are you still with us?' an all too familiar reminder that I ought to be back in the cave rather than travelling through my own fictional galaxy.

Judy brought me back to the 'real' world from which I had momentarily escaped.

'Lunch?'

I was faced with a colourful choice of pubs for lunch, The Green Man, The Blue Ball, The Red Lion but it was the fourth of Grantchester's pubs that we 'simply had to' visit. I expected that before the return to the grim household there would be a few more things we simply had to do, or see.

The *Rupert Brooke*, the fourth of the four pubs was Judy's choice for lunch, which, while I was reluctant to oppose, proved to be a decision I soon came to regret. My meagre finances would not be able to accommodate a proper repast. I ordered a bowl of lentil soup, claiming a sudden loss of appetite, which was not far from the truth. Judy joined me, passing up the meal she had been anticipating, social sensitivity being one of her most endearing qualities.

Following our inadequate, and all too brief, repast we had one imperative visit left, St Andrew and St Mary church, only a short stroll from the *Rupert Brooke*. Judy, the Grantchester encyclopaedia and peerless tour guide, explained that at the time Brooke wrote those famous

lines *Stands the Church clock at ten to three?* it was less for the poetic rhythm than because the clock had actually stopped at that time.

We lay together on the grass, alone in the churchyard, enjoying the late afternoon autumn sun, a romantic idyll which demanded a kiss and perhaps a little more. I was not quite sure what my next move could be. This was new territory for me. I hadn't read the manual and never enjoyed fatherly advice on the courting of young ladies. In the contest between the fear of rejection and a venture into, as yet unexplored territory, my quandary was resolved by the church bell intimating that time for tea, was now well past.

"I didn't realise that was the time. We must go", Judy said., already getting up and putting her jacket back on. The mood had been broken by my ambivalence and indecision, and it was, apparently time to return to the joys of Trumpington village and the accrued wisdom of Mr Didcock. He did not disappoint and dinner included a tedious review of his day in the office, reiterated conversations with his clearly witless colleagues. I was, however, still back in the churchyard, relishing and regretting our all-too-brief frisson, on the edge of something that, I would soon learn, was not to be.

Dishes duly despatched we joined Mr Pomposity for the news, *Coronation Street* (which he declared to be rubbish but watched nonetheless), and *Opportunity Knocks*, each successive contestant condemned as 'worse than the last' and 'our Judy could do better', which was probably true. When I was finally released to my solitary bedroom it was with a mixture of relief and frustration. I lay awake contemplating my future and balancing my growing love (or at least affection) against the baggage

that would come with her. I imagined her, two doors away along the corridor doing the same. Loving Judy and consummating our relationship would be bought at too high a cost.

It was suddenly a blustery spring day, snow still on the ground. I was surprised to see Macniven dressed in jeans and open neck shirt. He told me he had hitchhiked from Australia, entirely uninvited. What was he doing as my best man, with his salacious speech peppered with expletives and excessive sexual innuendo. Luckily, my disapproving parents weren't present. But Judy's parents were and Mr Didcock was now rehearsing his own speech which he was preparing to read from of a large leather-bound Bible. The lovely young couple would, he proudly announced, move in with the family at least until our newly built semi-detached house in Trumpington would be ready. He had found a job for me in his firm as a trainee clerk. And then Judy and I were in bed with mum and dad sitting watching to make sure there was no 'hanky panky'. But what was Cyril doing there? In our bedroom?

I jolted awake. It was three a.m. A sense of relief washed over me. I was obviously being sent a message. It was time to move on.

Whoever said that parting is such sweet sorrow, could not have met the Didcock family. There was nothing sweet about my declaration of intent, a heady mixture of relief and outrage from the father of the household and a tearful bewilderment from Judy. I made a patently insincere promise to return in an indeterminate future and I left with a final Judas kiss.

My nemesis was about to be.

Chapter 4 Meet Willy Laing

As I was yet to become familiar with the concept of public transport, I hitchhiked my way in a series of short and largely unadventurous hops to Dover where I had to break into my hard-earned Butlin's savings to pay for the three-hour ferry to Ostend. The sea crossing was not particularly rough but rough enough for me to spend three hours returning the contents of my meagre breakfast into the English Channel.

It was beginning to get dark when I eventually disembarked, shedding my old sea legs for a more grounded, but still shaky, pair. My vow to relinquish travel was suddenly forgotten as I was immediately seduced by the promenade at Ostend, the illuminations, the souvenir shops, the street traders, the outdoor café life. Perhaps, having spent too long in Glasgow where, it was said, they take in the pavements at night, the vibrant activity and the quality of the night air was a new and altogether welcome experience.

With my youth hostel card in hand and a set of quite explicit directions I managed, nonetheless, to take a wrong turning to be confronted with what looked like a youth hostel but was in fact a maison de jeunesse. I thought I would go in and ask for directions to a bona fide hallmarked youth hostel but, for some reason, perhaps the persuasiveness of the comely proprietor to bide a while, the door slid open, I entered and I met Willy Laing.

I assumed at first he was the proprietor as he was clearly not a youth and not of an age to be hostelling. This was, he reminded when later I was impertinent