BOB THE ROBIN

A LOVE LETTER TO BRITAIN'S FAVOURITE BIRD



TONY PUTMAN

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To Bob and all the animals

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Preface



A bold robin sat on the branch of a beautiful old plum tree. It glanced at me as I approached, but did not move. As I had my camera in my hand, I took its picture.

This was my first encounter with the robin I later called Bob.

Sometimes in life you get to meet someone you feel at one with – where there's a special connection. It's not always something you understand or can explain, but it's there, and you both feel it. I had that connection not with a person but with an animal, a wild bird. He stood no taller than 4 inches high, but his personality was the size of the world.

I knew Bob for over three years. We went through a lot together: the highs and the lows of daily life. When I was with him everything felt good; away from him, I often thought of him and wondered how he was.

I'd got to know seven other robins before I met Bob. I built up a friendship with each of them – and then they disappeared. Losing them really affected me. It was like losing a much-loved pet, or even a family member. I vowed not to let it happen again.

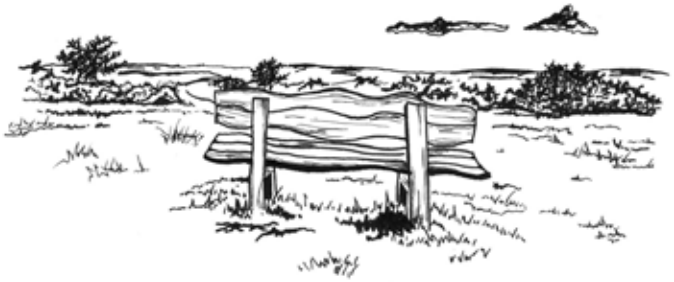
But Bob had other ideas.

It was he who chose me. It felt as if he wanted to be my friend, rather than the other way round. Maybe he could sense something in me because of my experience with his predecessors. I don't know. I am never going to be able to fully understand the reasoning of a wild creature.

Little by little, I let Bob into my life.

Chapter One

A Country Boyhood



I grew up in an end-of-terrace house in Edenbridge in Kent, a town nestled in the valley of the River Eden. This pocket of south-east England is a nature's paradise, scattered with hills and valleys, ancient woodlands, chalk grasslands, orchards and hedgerows. The Romans built the road that crosses the river here, and the town has many historic buildings. It is also close to Hever

Castle (the childhood home of Anne Boleyn), Penshurst Place (once the property of her future husband, Henry VIII), and Chartwell (the family home of Winston Churchill for 40 years), so it must have had its share of illustrious visitors over the centuries.

Our house backed onto some fields, and that is where my friends and I spent a lot of our time as children. There were ponds and patches of woodland to explore, too, and all around us were animals. I was definitely an outdoor sort of kid.

On Saturday mornings I used to ask Dad if we could go for a walk along the Eden. I loved trying to see the fish in the water, or creatures that lived on the riverbank. We sometimes saw grass snakes, searching for prey along the water's edge. Mammals, fish, reptiles – I was fascinated by them all.

The river wasn't far from our home but, as a youngster, I had to have adult supervision.

I didn't mind, though; I loved being out with my dad, as we had similar interests. We'd talk as we walked. Sometimes Dad told me about his own childhood – about how he would look for lizards along the railway embankments, and how he used to keep mice in the shed he had in his garden. His mum eventually persuaded him to let the mice go and she bought him a goldfish to make up for it – but it died the next day!

They were happy years. I enjoyed the world around me and I was starting to appreciate everything in it.

But all that changed when I was 11 and my parents split up. We fell on hard times. I had to move from our house into council accommodation. Luckily, this wasn't far from our previous home, so I was still near my friends, who were very important to me. I lived with my mum, stepdad Steve and brother Michael, a year my senior. Michael and I would visit Dad

at weekends and during school holidays. I loved my parents equally, but I missed Dad terribly and worried about him constantly (something that was alleviated slightly when he married my stepmum, Alma, a few years later). I just wanted to see him and be close to him. When he took up gardening for a living, I helped him at every opportunity. That was how I learned my trade as a gardener.

My family always had pets – just cats to start with, but later, after Mum started working at an animal-rescue centre in Edenbridge, we ended up with dogs, too. The centre had been set up originally just for cats and dogs, but no creature was ever turned away. Michael and I would help out during the school holidays with our friends Leah and Hannah, whose mother ran the centre. There was always something to do. One of our jobs was to catch the rabbits at the end of the day and get them back into their enclosure. That could take a while, as they had a large grassy area to run around in

with lots of holes in it. Sometimes, if the adults were busy, we'd have to show visitors around who were looking to provide a home for one of the animals.

There was a main enclosure where most of the dogs ran free, plus kennels for the less sociable ones. The constant barking was both harrowing and sad. Even at that age, I wondered how so many dogs could be cast aside in a country of supposed animal lovers. There was also a separate area containing about half a dozen kennels for bitches and their puppies, or sometimes motherless puppies. We, of course, all wanted to be there – who doesn't love a puppy? – despite us having to clear out all the mess they produced. We'd also help to feed the ones who had been orphaned. It was pretty relentless, and even more so for Leah and Hannah, who lived on site and had to do night feeds too. But every one of their family was passionate about animals and I'm sure none of them minded.

My brother and I adored Leah and Hannah's dogs. Leah had Sky and Teaser, who were collies, and there were other dogs, too. Teaser was my favourite. She would play ball all day long if she got the chance, and I was happy to play along with her. One day, when Michael was kneeling down looking in one of the puppy pens, I watched Sky walk right up to him and cock his leg up my brother's back as if Michael was a lamppost! I thought it was hilarious, Michael less so.

Mum's kindness knew no limits when it came to animals – and Steve was just the same. She began to bring home wild creatures from the centre that soon became pets as well. Once she brought home a fox cub called Abbey who needed special attention until she was old enough to go into an enclosure with other foxes. I can't remember what had happened to her exactly, other than that she had lost her family and was too young to survive on her own. She lived happily among us and our



dogs – by then we had two Jack Russells and a German Shepherd, all from the rescue. I think Abbey thought she was one of them. She was a playful little thing, and though she had sharp teeth, they were never used in malice. But as she grew older, her wild instincts began to take over and she became more nervous of us. It was obvious she needed to go back with her own kind. Natural instinct isn't to be underestimated.

Mum also tried to hand-rear three orphaned squirrels, but they all died. There was a happier ending with the one that came next. Peanut the squirrel had a cage in the living room, and when

he was let out, he would run everywhere – up the wallpaper, up the curtains, up our legs. He was great fun! Like Abbey, he went to live with his own kind when he was old enough.

I was learning to have a healthy respect for all creatures, whatever they were. I saw how a bond could be formed with a wild animal as well as with a pet, but that there were boundaries that had to be observed. It was a lesson that would stay with me.

* * *

As soon as I was old enough (13), I got a paper round at our local newsagent. I was up every morning before six to do my deliveries, come rain or shine. Two years later, I found myself a weekend and holiday job too, working as a gardener at Edenbridge House. The house was privately owned, but its beautiful garden was open to the public on certain days during the summer. Mrs Lloyd, the owner, was gardening mad, and

could be found outdoors whatever the weather. I learned such a lot from her and her husband. One of my jobs was to keep the edges of the lawns tidy and trimmed which, when done well, added the finishing touch to the garden. If it was raining, I was confined to the shed to pot up young plants. This was my least favourite job and I was always desperate to get outside as soon as the rain had stopped. The other gardeners were all such nice people; they were always willing to show me the ropes and nothing was ever too much trouble. It must have been their extended time outdoors that made them so kind. I'm sure the natural world brings out the best in people!

As well as looking after the lawns, I kept the ponds and streams clear of weed and tried to get everything looking immaculate for the first opening day. Mrs Lloyd also assigned me to take charge of the parking so I asked my best friend, Ben, who lived a few doors down from me, to

help. I knew I could trust him to take it seriously and that he would respect my place of work.

We soon learned just how rude some people were when we did that job. Some of them didn't like being told where to park, and even tried hitting us with their cars when they couldn't get their own way! But we stuck to our guns, and they eventually did as they were told. I also helped in the kitchens with the washing-up, and with all the tidying when the last guest had gone home. It was frantic work, but I saw how each one of us had our role to play and, if we played it well, the whole operation would go smoothly.

Having these jobs from a young age taught me to have a good work ethic. I learned that no job was beneath me. I wasn't academic. I knew I wasn't going to be staying on at school any longer than I was legally required to, and that some sort of physical labour was going to be my best option when it came to finding employment.

But that was fine by me; the satisfaction of a job well done kept me motivated and keen to learn. And being appreciated for my efforts was the icing on the cake.

At the age of 16, I began a course at a local horticultural college to improve my gardening knowledge. We were a class of around 20, all boys and most of us straight out of school. We were taught how to prune roses, how to take and grow cuttings, and about farm machinery, the latter of little interest to me. We also learned the Latin names for plants: not one of my strengths, as my memory for such things is rubbish! I suppose it was preparing us for what I would call the 'finer' side of gardening, something I knew that I was never going to be doing in the real world. I just wanted to get stuck into the hard, manual tasks. I guess I already knew a lot of what I needed to know from Dad and from Edenbridge House, where I continued to work.

I came out of my studies with a first-year diploma in horticulture – though I'm not sure that I actually learned very much! – and a desire to get out there and start gardening myself. I was 17 years old with dreams of becoming a self-employed gardener like Dad, but I was very green (no pun intended!) about it all. Little did I know how difficult it would be. I had no money (or means of borrowing any), no driver's licence, no tools or machinery. I had no chance. That dream would have to wait.

For nearly three years I worked in the quality-control department of a glass-bottle factory. It was a terrible place. We had no heating in our department, which was freezing cold in the winter, but it was always boiling hot near the furnaces that were burning constantly. Added to that, there was glass dust everywhere, which was a terrible health hazard. When the factory was closed down and I was made redundant I had to

look for other work. I moved to the factory of a garden-games manufacturer where I was in the woodwork department, making boxes for croquet sets. But when the owners decided they needed to get rid of someone, another young lad and I were put into competition with each other for the job by seeing who could make the boxes faster. The loser would be sacked – really unfair, when I think about it. I was always a slow learner, which was a worry, but once I got the hang of something there was no stopping me.

I thought I'd scuppered my chances when I practically took the top off my thumb on a large sanding belt. When I felt it go numb – and saw a large chunk of skin ripped away – I knew I was in trouble. I came back from hospital with a heavily bandaged thumb. How could I possibly compete now? Strangely, it had the opposite effect, and seemed to spur me on. I managed to finish my daily quota of eight boxes by lunchtime

every day, even though my supervisor told me to slow down. I couldn't help it – it's the way I'm programmed! So after that I would help my fellow workers – or make a nuisance of myself, playing silly pranks. But I knew I had had a lucky escape for one whose hands were the tools of his trade.

After I was moved to the packaging department, I was bored and decided to give my gardening round a go. I failed the first time, and ended up in another factory, making windows. I did as much overtime as I could physically manage during the two years I was there but, even then, I wasn't earning or saving much. I felt trapped. I knew that the time had come to give gardening another try.

I was 27, and this time I didn't look back.

* * *

I met my wife Joanna in The Star Inn, on the High Street in Edenbridge, where my mates and

I often went for a drink. I was 23, and 25-year-old Joanna had moved to the UK from Poland to learn English. As soon as I saw her I knew that I wanted to marry her. I was never too good at chatting to girls or trying to impress them, and it was my friend Simon who asked Joanna's friend if I could have her number, knowing that I liked her. She said yes, and we've been together ever since.

When Joanna was made redundant she moved in with me and my family. That was when I had to postpone my first attempt at becoming a gardener and return to factory work to secure a regular income. Joanna found a job at one of the supermarkets. We worked hard to save up for somewhere of our own, and three months later we moved into the only place we could afford to rent – a one-bedroom flat in the village of Four Elms, just outside Edenbridge. It was pretty awful! There was no central heating, and the electric radiators we bought only took the edge

off the cold. Spending the Big Freeze winter of 2010 living there was not a pleasant experience. The flat also had terrible damp. We stayed for five years, saving up as much as we could so that we could move somewhere better one day.

I was a self-employed gardener at last, and while it wasn't easy leaving a secure, if mind-numbing, job, it was a relief to be my own boss. I could work as many hours as I wanted. How much I earned was in my hands now. I had to take some risks: in the early days, I had no alternative but to keep my machinery in my van, which is never a good idea, as theft of garden machinery is quite common. I dread to think what I would have done if it had been stolen.

Throughout all this time, Joanna was – and continues to be – amazing. She took evening courses in English and accounting, constantly looking for ways to improve herself. I've always been envious of her work ethic and her ability to revise in

the way she does. I have a work ethic, too, but lack that discipline to immerse myself in a subject and stick at it, especially if it's boring. But we support each other's endeavours; we always have.

I've always had to think carefully before I take chances in life. That includes how I spend my money, as I've never had a safety net of any sort. I totally understand why some people choose to play it safe, especially where finances are concerned. To go from being employed, with the security that it provides, to being your own boss is not a decision to be taken lightly.

But I've always been ambitious, too – a 'why not?' kind of person. If someone tells me I can't do something or that I'm not good enough to do it, I like to prove them wrong. I might have to take the long way round to get there, but I get there in the end.

Class and status have never meant much to me: I see us all as equals. As far as I'm concerned,

respect is something that's earned, not a God-given right for being born into a certain family or doing a high-status job. I think the most valuable lesson I have learned from having very little is realizing that, actually, little is all I really need.

Chapter Two

The First Robins



They say that robins are a gardener's best friend. They are certainly the most sociable of garden birds. When you're working outdoors, it's not unusual to spot a robin close by, or for one to land at your feet as it hoovers up any worms or insects you might have disturbed. It is a mutually beneficial encounter: the gardener is usually