# A Parrot in the Pepper Tree

A Sort of Sequel to Driving Over Lemons

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Extract

# Driving Over Ice

It was late at night and for six long hours I had been driving along an icy tunnel of road into the snowy forest of northern Sweden. I hunched stiffly over the steering wheel to peer along a dismal beam at the monotony of pine trees and snow. One of my headlights had already given up the ghost, snuffed out in a futile struggle against the lashing ice and minus twenty-five degrees cold, and beyond the feeble pallor of its mate and the dim green glow of my dashboard there spread an endless blackness. For more than an hour, now, not a single car had passed me, and not a single lamplight glimmered through the trees. Country Swedes have an appealing tradition of leaving a light burning all night in the window to cheer the passing traveller, but for miles there had been nothing but the deep black of the star-studded sky, and the withering cold. Cocooned in the fuggy warmth of my hired Volvo I

had the feeling of being further away from my fellow man than I had ever thought possible.

The radio was little help. The only station I had managed to pick up seemed entirely devoted to accordion and fiddle dances, the sort of low-key jolly fare you might expect at the funeral of a popular dog. I found it a little depressing. Instead, to keep awake, I fell into practising Mandarin Chinese, which for years I had been trying to learn. Counting out loud to yourself, yi, er, san, si, wu, is a good way of getting the hang of the tones and it helped me to forget how incredibly lonely I felt. Every time I got to a hundred or so, I would allow my mind to skip back to my home in Spain – the sun on a terrace of orange and lemon trees, Ana, my wife, and I lying on the grass, squinting up through the leaves, while our daughter Chloë hurled sticks for the dog – and then homesickness would strike with an almost physical stab and I'd start again – yi, er, san, si, wu...

As I worked my way up into the mid-sixties for a third time, the car engine began to play up. Every few minutes its steady rumble would be racked by an alarming series of coughs and judders, and the car would begin to vibrate, rising to a climax of lunatic shuddering. Then it would calm down again and resume its usual rumble.

Each time this happened I was beset by a vivid image of death by freezing. With the air outside at minus twenty-five degrees it wouldn't take long. The warmth of the cabin would dissipate in about ten minutes. That would allow me just enough time to grab all the clothes from my bag and put the whole lot on, capped by the enormous canvas and sheepskin coat (twenty quid in the Swedish Army Surplus), big mittens and woolly hat. My body heat would warm up the ensemble from the inside for about half an hour,

then, via the usual process of thermodynamic exchange, the immense body of cold air would invade the tiny body of warmth that was me and overwhelm it. Jumping up and down, running on the spot, all that sort of stuff would prolong the sparks of warmth for a little longer, but I had read somewhere that you shouldn't do too much of it. Just how much was too much, though, I couldn't quite recall.

Still, as the engine revived once again and the car hummed on, I patted the dashboard affectionately in the hope that this would encourage it to shake off its troubles and drive me all the way to Norrskog, the farming village that I was heading for, still hours away through the forest.

I had picked the car up the evening before from Weekie's Car Lot, just outside the Copenhagen boat dock. Weekie had looked at me through his thick glasses and a fog of cigarette smoke. 'Take whichever one you want...,' he said, '...from over there,' and he pointed with a dismissive gesture to what looked like a scrap yard outside. I stepped out into the bone-chilling cold, the wind whipping across the Öresund shore, and inspected the offerings. There were old wrecks lying morosely here and there, some slumped down over a flat tyre, others with the bonnets off, revealing engines caked with grease and oil and a light covering of snow. This was where cars belonging to respectable, well-to-do folk came to rest, relegated to a twilight spot as transport for those who couldn't afford a proper hire car. But there was something appealing about Weekie's. It was like a sanctuary for old unloved horses; for a minimal fee you could take them out for a ride. I chose a pond-green

Volvo, paid the small deposit, slung my kit in the back and headed off along the long long roads to northern Sweden.

I was here for a month to make money shearing sheep in the gloom of winter – a job that made enough to keep our small family and farm in Andalucia going for the rest of the year. It seemed that I was doomed to this annual purgatory. Our Spanish mountain farm was a cheap place to live and, with its produce to sustain us, we had few bills or outgoings. But we made hardly any money. There never seemed quite enough to cover the various domestic crises that beset us, like the generator and gas fridge packing up, or a wild boar trashing our new wire fence, or one of Chloë's beloved flamenco shoes getting ripped to shreds by the dogs. So these Swedish trips were essential.

As I drove on towards Norrskog, I mused, as I had each year before, on alternative ways of making ready cash. I had one new possibility this year, having sent off a few stories I'd written about life on our farm to some publishing friends in London. I wondered what they were making of my handwritten pages – too much about sheep and dogs probably – and allowed myself to daydream (if that's the right word in a pitch black Swedish afternoon) about a book contract and cheque. Meanwhile I kept a bleary eye open for elk.

Elk are the big danger on Swedish roads. You can't insure against them because the forests are literally swarming with the creatures. They leap out from the trees straight in front of your car – just a couple of seconds' warning and there they are. If you're unlucky, you knock the legs out from under them – a big elk is like a giant horse with antlers – and they come hurtling across the bonnet, through the windscreen and into the cabin with you.

This intimacy is invariably fatal on both sides. For the elk, because it's been hit by a ton of speeding ironwork, and for you because you're pinned to your seat by your belt with an elk thrashing out its death throes in your lap. If you've really got your foot down, they can take the whole top of the car off, along with the top of the occupants. The Swedes do all they can to mitigate this unpleasantness, erecting tall fences along motorways and elk flashers to pick up the lights of cars and flash their warnings into the forest. But there are still hundreds of accidents every year.

I have an elk-avoidance trick that has long stood me in good stead. You find a big truck that's going about the same speed as you and you hang upon its tail. Of course you are constantly sprayed by all the muck kicked up by its back wheels, and if the trucker brakes hard and you happen not to notice, then you've all the inconvenience of a massive truck bursting through your windscreen instead of an elk. Still, on balance it's more restful than the strain of constantly scanning the dark band between forest and road for any signs of movement.

It was the prospect of an elk encounter that had led me to choose Weekie's Volvo. Piqued by Japanese competition in the car market, Volvo once ran an advert on billboards throughout Sweden. It showed a Japanese car full of very surprised Japanese and, standing before them, looming over the car, a vast bull elk. The text read 'Buy Volvo – there are no elk in Japan.'

The first town to break the endless vista of forest and dark was Norrköping (pronounced Gnaw-sherping). I stopped

there to eat a dish of microwaved meatballs and to phone the first farm on my itinerary. This occupied a small island three hundred miles to the north.

'The sea is frozen over,' the farmer told me on the phone. 'You can drive across to us if you don't come too close in to the shore. The ice is a bit thin by the reeds. I'll hang a red bucket in the birch tree by the track, so you'll know where to turn off.'

'Of course,' I said, not really absorbing the information.

As I urged the old car on out into the huge darkness beyond the streetlights of the town, the night folded over me like the sea. The heater whirred away to itself, filling the cabin with a warm fug, and for a couple of hours the engine ran smoothly. I was lulled and warm and tired. Then, just as I was wriggling around to get myself comfortable in the seat, the engine cut out. It juddered, then fired and started again, then coughed and stopped. My blood turned cold and my arms and legs went weak.

I got out. Snow was falling now, fast and thick, damping down the already heavy silence. It was so perfectly quiet I could hear my blood squeezing through the capillaries. I heard my heart thumping rhythmically and sensed the infinitesimal humming of neurons in my brain.

The car ticked and creaked as the hot metal cooled. I stood there for perhaps a minute, hardly breathing for fear of breaking the extraordinary spell of silence. Then the cold was too much for me and I climbed back in. If I left the car to cool for a few minutes, it might start again. I sat behind the wheel with my mouth open, watching the heavy flakes falling in the pale glow of the snow. In minutes the car was cold, all the warmth in the cabin was gone. I tried the starter. The engine fired. I switched the headlight on and

moved off unsteadily along the road.

The car was running very roughly now, not helped by a fresh snowstorm. Snowstorms can have a dangerously hypnotic effect, as the snow seems to form a whirling tunnel in front of you and it can be difficult to take your eyes from it. I was starting to get really worried. My map showed a small town about twenty kilometres on, so I kept going, heart in mouth, focused on the point where all my problems would end.

The town was called Åbro and as I rolled in, at eleven o'clock, it looked like it had been tucked up in bed for hours. A lone pizza place was shuttered and the only light came from the streetlights. But as I chugged on around the backstreets I came upon a dimly lit sign that said 'Hotel'.

I parked the car and rang the bell. I waited and shivered a bit and gasped at the sheer weight of the falling snow. The Volvo creaked beside me. I rang the bell again. Still nothing, not a light, not a sound. At last an upstairs window opened.

'Yes? What do you want?' came the curt voice of a middle-aged woman.

'Ah, um – this is the hotel is it?'

'Yes'

'Well, my car has broken down and I'd be really grateful if you could let me have a bed for the night.'

'You can't, we have no övernattning.'

'What do you mean you have no övernattning?'

'I mean we have no övernattning!'

'This isn't a hotel then?'

'Yes, it is a hotel.'

'Well if it is a hotel then surely I can stay the night.'

'It is a hotel but you can't stay the night because we have no övernattning,' she repeated firmly, and, as if this brought

things to a satisfactory conclusion, slammed the window shut. I shouted that as I had nowhere else to sleep it would be entirely her responsibility if I froze to death. However, I might as well have yelled at the snow. This hotelier was not going to relent for one feeble foreigner with a grudge about its policy on övernattning – which, incidentally, means staying the night.

Half an hour earlier, I would have said that I had reached rock bottom but it was nothing to this new despair. My options for getting through that bitter night were looking extremely grim. I decided to sleep on the back seat of the car outside the wretched hotel and leave the engine running, both for warmth and to annoy the harpie of the hotel. There was a risk that I'd asphyxiate or freeze, but at least I'd have the satisfaction of leaving an untidy heap – car and frozen body – on the hotel's doorstep in the morning.

I lay down, fully clothed and with a few extra layers added for good measure, beneath the sheepskin coat. My heart was full of spleen, my head full of wrath, and my teeth chattered. Soon, though, I slept and when I awoke in the early morning hours, the motor was still purring and the heater humming away and I was alive. I breathed in, exultantly, and felt the hairs in my nostrils shrivel and freeze – it's very cold indeed when they do that.

I left that town still fulminating about the hotel. What could be the use of such a ludicrous thing? What nefarious purpose could it possibly serve? It seemed most unlikely that the town's upstanding inhabitants were whooping it up in rooms rented hourly. Swedish country towns are

not known for their erotic shenanigans, so it had to be for drinking: there is nowhere in rural Sweden where you can sit down in congenial surroundings and order a pint of beer, or work your way reflectively through a bottle of wine. The preferred method is to swig from a bottle of vodka or cheap whisky discreetly hidden in a brown paper bag. The hotel would be a drinking club, that's what.

Within an hour, however, my anger had vanished before the mechanical ministrations of Matts, a thick-set, bristly man with kindly eyes, who helped me push the car to his workshop on the edge of the next village. Matts knew exactly what was wrong and, while his wife brought me steaming cups of tea, he beavered around with screwdriver and wrench, and in half an hour declared it fixed. I asked him how much I owed, a little nervous as repairs of any sort are astronomical in Sweden.

'Oh, don't worry about it,' he insisted. 'I used to be on the road myself when I was young, and anyway it's a pleasure to help out a traveller from abroad; we don't get many here.' I pressed him but he refused and he waved me a cheery goodbye as the car and I purred off into the woods. Matts was the sort of Swede who could make övernattning in a refrigerated van seem bearable.

Pleased with this turn of events, I began to enjoy the Swedish landscape. The clouds had lifted and the sun crawled low into the frozen blue sky. The snow glittered on the trees and as the countryside opened out a little I saw the perfect white of the frozen sea beneath a fresh fall of snow. Spotting the red bucket in a silver birch, I wound down a sinuous track through the woods, pure white and dappled with sunlight. At the bottom of the track was a little boat dock deep in snow, and sure enough, just beside

it the track dipped down the bank and headed out to sea. A couple of miles off I could see some pine-covered islands dark against the dazzling white sea. The tyres of the car squeaked on the new snow as I eased gingerly down the bank onto the marked road. Then, wincing at every bump or crunch, I set off to drive across the sea.

'What happens if I fall through the ice?' I thought to myself. The car would sink like a brick in the icy water, of course. Then, assuming I did manage to squeeze out and swim up to the hole made by the car (no easy matter), I'd still have to scrabble out onto the thick walls of ice. I remembered that you can't do this without ice spikes. You need one in each hand to get enough grip on the ice to be able to haul yourself out. And, even if you happen to have a pair handy and the strength to do the hauling, how long would you last, sopping wet and sitting on a sea of ice?

As I moved cautiously forward, following the marker buoys and thinking these dark thoughts, I saw a small yellow object, like a toy van, leave the island and turn my way. It grew quickly, reaching enormous proportions as it hurtled past in a flurry of snow. The driver, fag hanging out of his mouth, gave me a jolly grin. It was a furniture lorry. I felt relieved and then a little worried that its huge weight might have cracked the solid ice.

'How do those people know the day the ice is no longer safe to drive a furniture lorry across?' I wondered. But luck was with me and soon I arrived at the yellow reeds around the island. I stopped the car and stepped gingerly out onto the ice. Looking back I saw the lorry vanishing in the brightness.

When I switched off the engine, I was again struck by the extraordinary stillness of the Swedish winter. There is no

wind, and even if there were, the trees would be too heavy with their thick load of frozen snow to move. There are no birds to sing and the sea is silenced by its sarcophagus of ice. The only sound in the landscape is you.

These thoughts were cut short by the sudden clatter of a snow scooter. A farmer, clad in an orange boilersuit and woolly hat, appeared through a gap in the trees, dismounted and trudged towards my car. 'Hej!' he offered sadly. 'Welcome to Norbo.' He took some time in getting his right mitten off while he gazed blankly at the snow. Then he held out a pale pink and white hand. 'Björn,' he muttered, withdrawing the proffered hand quickly from my grip.

'Chris,' said I.

'Welcome to Norbo,' he said again.

'Tak – thanks,' I replied, trying to keep the conversation rolling, though it seemed to have a finality about it.

Björn was aged about thirty, a pink, rounded man with a melancholy look about him. He seemed more comfortable with silence than small talk although he did allow a wan smile to flicker across his muted features when our eyes met. I gave him a big grin but this seemed a little too much for him and he looked away, affecting a quiet cough into his mittens.

In amicable silence we loaded my clobber onto the trailer that dragged behind the scooter, mounted up, and scudded over the ice to the shore. Half hidden by the pines was a big yellow house, part stone and part timber. It had recently had a coat of paint but needed a bit of fundamental

attention to its carpentry to bring it in line with the usual immaculate turnout of Swedish houses. But as the Swedes themselves so nicely put it: Bättre lite skit i hörnet än ett rent helvete – 'Better a little shit in the corner than a clean hell.'

We passed the farmhouse and weaved our way through a birch wood to the sheep's quarters. This was a cathedral of timber, a colossal hulk of faded red planks and rotting beams. From inside came the baaing of hundreds of sheep, like the buzzing of a swarm of huge bees.

Björn took a shovel and with a few deft strokes in the snow revealed a little wooden door. With his knife he cut the string that secured it, and kicked it hard. It graunched inwards, enough for us to squeeze through. As we entered, the baaing became deafening, and my nose was assailed by the thick miasma of damp wool, mouldy hay and sheepshit.

Gradually my eyes adapted to the gloom – what little light there was entered through cracks in the planking and dusty windows – and to a truly disheartening sight. There were sheep everywhere, grubby black creatures with steam rising from their backs. The steam hung in a great smelly cloud and within the cloud, seemingly drifting in the air, were even more sheep. They were wandering along plankways that led into the cavernous vault of the barn. Everywhere were huge malodorous bales of hay and silage, with sheep on them and in them, like weevils in a biscuit.

'Bit of a balls-up, eh Björn?' I muttered in a feeble understatement. I was looking at one of the grimmest jobs I'd had to do in ten years of work in Sweden.

Björn looked crestfallen. His eyelashes brushed his cheeks as he looked down and wrung his hands a little.

'You see, it's been a terrible year,' he said quietly.

'It certainly has, Björn – these sheep look like shit! Still,

don't you worry about it, we'll get at them this afternoon and in a couple of days they'll look like new!'

'Well then, shall we go and have something to eat?' he said, with the beginnings of a grin. I decided that I liked Björn.

Björn's parents, Tord and Mia, were waiting for us in the kitchen. Unlike the barn this had a scrubbed, colourful look – it was clearly Mia's domain – and a warm smell of cinnamon buns and coffee wafted towards us from a tray on the broad wooden table.

'Come and eat,' intoned Mia, clumping back to the oven and then bending at the hip in a stiff bow to lift out another tray of buns. She winced a little before straightening up.

'We hope you'll stay,' she added and glanced at her husband as if calling on him to flesh out the invite. Tord, a larger, rounder, pinker version of Björn, smiled broadly at me but seemed unwilling to commit himself to words. Instead he helped himself to another bun, and gestured that I should do the same.

'Thank you, these are nice buns,' I enthused. It was true they were nice buns, with lots of cinnamon and sugar, but they were also the same as every other bun I'd tasted from the north to the south of rural Sweden on any given day.

'Aah det är de – that they are...' Tord agreed, and gestured towards the coffee pot.

'Nice coffee,' I commented, a mite less sincerely as I hate coffee that's been boiled twice. This didn't, however, seem the moment for experimental chit-chat.

I looked meaningfully at Björn. He nodded and we rose

from the table to go back to the sheep shed. Back in the barn I changed into icy, grease-caked shearing clothes and hung my machine in a corner while Björn set up a mercury lamp. It was only half past two but the sun was dropping fast. The shabby black sheep surrounded us, munching insolently, and as the mercury lamp built up to full power I was illuminated in a pool of bluish white light like an actor in a very fringe theatre. Björn disappeared into the darkness and came back with a sheep. The first customer of the day. I pulled the starter cord.

The first stroke when you shear a sheep goes down across the brisket and out over the belly – or it should do. But the machine stuck almost immediately on a matted snag of belly-wool. I pushed a little harder, took the comb out and tried another angle. Same thing. I pushed and pulled and tugged and strained but still that first bit of wool of the day refused to come off. Either Björn had selected the worst sheep in the flock for me or else I was in for a time of utmost misery.

The sheep was bad all over but eventually I managed to get most of its wool off, by dint of merciless pushing and jabbing and pulling the more reluctant bits off with my hand. She looked awful as she tripped back into the darkness.

'I'm sorry about that, Björn,' I gasped. 'She looks a fright, but it's taken nearly fifteen minutes to do one bloody sheep. If there are as many as you say there are then we're going to be here all week, and it's going to be a god-awful week!'

Björn looked miserable. 'Maybe this one is a little better,' he offered hopefully, dragging the next sheep from the shadows.

But it wasn't. Nor was the next one. Then came one that

you could describe only with expletives. I straightened up and groaned with the pain in my back. I had been at it for an hour and I had done four sheep. There were supposed to be three hundred-odd sheep in the flock... that would be seventy-five hours of this misery.

With a groan I looked ahead through the long tunnel of the week – the cold, the smelly barn – and most of all the loneliness, for much as I liked Björn, neither he nor his parents were the sort of folks you'd want to spend a whole week with. I started thinking about doing a bunk there and then.

'Who normally shears these sheep, Björn?'

'I usually do it myself, only I've hurt my back – chainsawing in the woods.' The old Swedish complaint.

Björn seemed to be reading my thoughts – and he looked desperate. With good reason. If I didn't shear these sheep, then I couldn't see anybody else coming all the way to do it. I thought about the long drive up here, the money that I needed, the worsening task I'd be leaving behind, and relented. I signalled to Björn to pull out another sheep.

Now I don't want to go on too much about sheep-shearing, but four sheep an hour is hell. With average clean good sheep I could normally manage twenty to twenty-five sheep an hour. Going at that rate the body is in constant fluid movement, all the muscles well exercised and freely moving in what amounts to almost a choreographed dance. But when you're bent over the same sheep, poking, jabbing and heaving in the same horrible posture, then the pain in the lower back, the middle back and the legs is almost unbearable – and it's no ball for the sheep, either.

Björn stood miserably beside me, his breath steaming in the dank air of the barn, while I heaved and struggled with

the sheep. As the day progressed, my thoughts turned black and I silently cursed everybody and everything: Björn and his wretched sheep and his disgusting barn and his parents. I was nothing but bitterness and back-pain. What a way to earn a living! What a waste of life!

'Let's finish now,' urged Björn, seeing the demons take hold.

'No, let's do two more. That way there'll be two less at the end of the job.'

Björn brought two more sheep and as if I were being rewarded for steadfastness of character they were both fliers. Young and firm-fleshed and well rounded they sat meek and compliant on the board as the wool peeled away like grey silk.

I staggered and stretched and thought about beer. Then I remembered that I was in rural Sweden. A light beer, brewed by some vile industrial chemical process, would be the best I could hope for. It might even be lättöl – alcohol 'free' and lacking also any flavour, aroma or pleasure. It always makes me think of George Orwell's 'Victory Beer' in 1984.

I hung up the shears and together Björn and I trudged across the frozen yard, the snow squeaking beneath our boots – which means, if I've got it right, that it's ten degrees or more below zero. Björn wrenched open the farmhouse door and we crowded in among ranks of evil-smelling boots and farm-wear. We peeled off our outer layers and padded in flopping woollen socks into the bright kitchen. Tord was there, smiling broadly as usual. He passed me a bottle of

lättöl and a pink-tinged plastic beaker.

'Thanks shall you have,' I said in that curious Swedish way.

Tord watched as I worked my way without enthusiasm through the beer. Tonight, he said, we would be going to the Norrskog Farmers' Study Circle weekly meeting. It would be most interesting for me, he thought, to come along and take part in the proceedings. I thought about declining. It certainly wouldn't be a wild evening out, but then I pictured us all sitting through that first night staring at a diminishing pile of cinnamon buns and sipping lättöl round the kitchen table. I went to get my coat.

We whizzed along icy roads in Tord's car towards a village hall in a clearing in the woods, stopping on the way to pick up Ernst, the chairman of the study circle, who lived in a little red house by the roadside. Ernst was small and wiry with a thin, slightly lop-sided mouth, and Tord seemed very much in awe of him. At the hall, Tord ushered me through the decompression chamber, a set of heavy double doors, and into the warm, brightly-lit wooden room. Motley groups of tall thick-set men in woollen shirts and baseball caps milled uncertainly about, sipping fruit squash from paper cups. These men worked alone deep in the woods with their chainsaws, or communed with their pigs in dark barns with the snow stacked up high against the windows. Small talk was not what they were good at and a grateful silence fell on the spasmodic and constipated attempts at conversation as Tord and Ernst entered.

'Hejsan!' (hello there) called Ernst as we passed through the hall. Everyone looked down at their boots and shuffled in acute embarrassment. 'Hej, Ernst!' muttered some brave soul. 'Hej, hej, hej…' came the quiet chorus. It was clear

that Ernst ran the show, such as it was, and when he spoke people listened, and whatever he said was greeted with relief because it meant that nobody else would be obliged to say anything. Thus the assembled company hung upon his lips.

'Tonight we have an Englishman with us,' announced Ernst. 'He is going to tell us about farming in England.'

'Bloody hell, Ernst, I can't...' I spluttered, before my words were stifled in a bout of muted clapping. I looked down at the sea of upturned baseball caps – well, there were twenty of them at least – and began.

'Er, good evening...' I said.

'Go'afton,' replied one or two.

There was a pause.

'I am really no expert,' I hazarded, playing for time. 'I don't know much about the technical side of farming or even the ordinary stuff like dry matter conversion rates and subsidy clawback ... perhaps I could, er, just answer a few of your questions about animals and crops?'

The baseball caps were trained expectantly upon me but nobody chose to break the silence, until at last Ernst set the ball rolling. 'Kris,' he began (kris – pronounced krees – means crisis in Swedish). 'Tell us, how big do you sell a cow in England?'

I saw from a concerted nodding of the hats that this was a subject that excited universal interest. But I hadn't the first idea how big we sold a cow in England. I tried to visualise a cow – the sort of fat cow that might be for sale. They're huge, cows are, with great pendulous bellies and massive heads. I did a quick mental calculation.

'Well, I suppose about a couple of tons.'

A gasp came from the hats, followed by animated

mumbling. I had clearly erred on the high side here.

'Of course,' I added. 'That would be a good big one – really, a hell of a big one. A more normal one would be around the one-and-a-half ton mark, I suppose.'

More incredulous gasping. I was in deep.

'And of course a lot of them are quite a bit smaller... some of them would probably go as low as a ton – the runts, that is.'

It got worse as the session wore on. By the end of the evening I seemed to have recreated England as a land populated by creatures of mythical proportions and bursting with the most improbable crops and astonishing yields.

In the car, afterwards, Björn broke the thick silence. 'Don't worry, Kris,' he said. 'People put too much emphasis on facts.'

There was a pause.

'What you said was... well, unusual. It woke people up.'

'Björn,' I groaned. 'How could I have said that a cow weighed two tons? That's nearly three times the normal size! They must think I'm an absolute and utter dickhead.'

'I don't know,' said Tord, from the back. His voice was on the verge of hysteria. 'It's not as if you offered to muck them out!'

I grew quite fond of Björn during the week at Norbo. Our glum days together in the sheep shed had become almost companionable, and on a couple of nights we went skiing in the moonlight across the sea, and on another to a local dance where we leaned against a wall in the shadows watching the girls and swigging whisky from a Coca-Cola

bottle hidden in a brown paper bag.

When Björn announced, 'There's only four left, I think,' I felt a surge of affection for my melancholy friend, which endured even as the four sheep turned into fifteen or more hidden in the shadows. As we made for the door of the barn, the sun came out and shone in needle-fine shafts through the holes in the rotten cladding of the walls, illuminating bits of shorn sheep, flanks heaving, breath steaming. Björn surveyed his flock with evident relief and, removing his mitten, shook my hand formally. 'Thanks shall you have,' he said.

The next morning, I slung my kit in the car and headed back across the sea, moving around to another half dozen farms separated by wearying drives through elk-infested forest.

As usual, the trip lasted about a month – a long time away from home, and a lot of time to spend in the dark, on the road or with sheep. The high point was when a letter from home caught up with me at one of the farms. Chloë had written me a little poem, in Spanish and accompanied by a picture of a princess, and Ana had written a wonderful and witty letter, which carried momentous news.

Apparently my publishing friends in London reckoned they might be able to make something of my stories about the farm, and they had sent an advance so that I could get my head down and finish it. 'Prepare yourself for being a bestselling author,' noted Ana wryly. 'All you have to do is sell a few lorryloads of books and you need never go shearing in Sweden again.'

I grinned bovinely at this remote prospect, much as a giant cow might grin in the meadows of England.