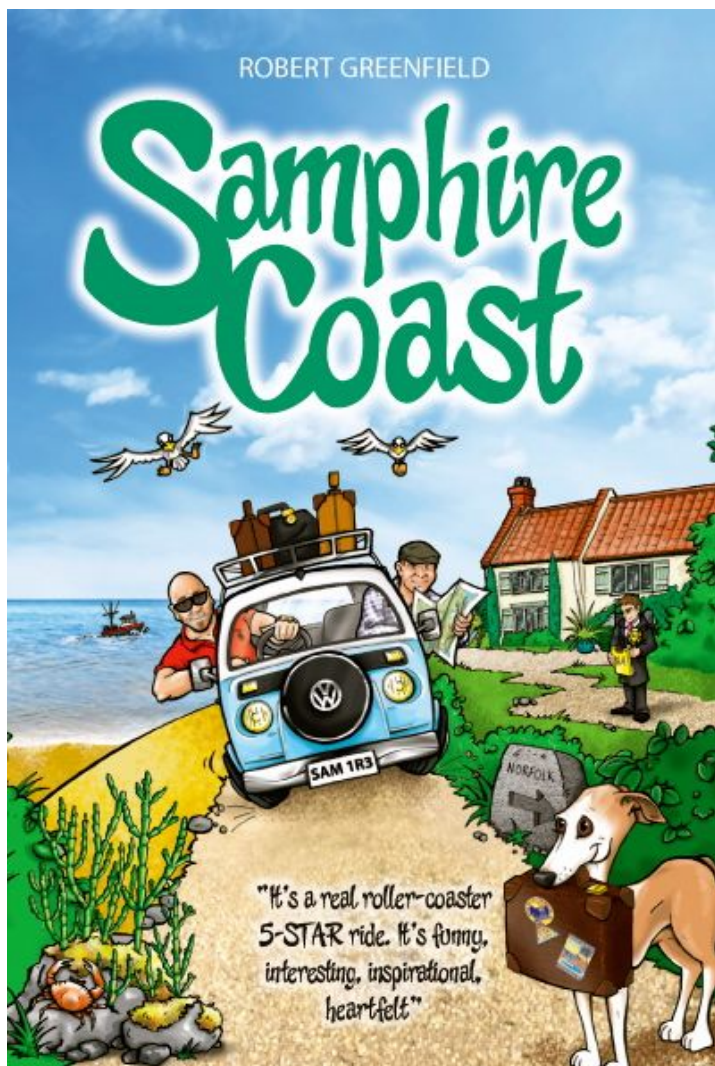


ROBERT GREENFIELD

Samphire Coast



*"It's a real roller-coaster
5-STAR ride. It's funny,
interesting, inspirational,
heartfelt"*

Dedication

For my soul mate Michael.

Robert Greenfield

Sapphire Coast



Vanguard Press

VANGUARD PAPERBACK

© Copyright 2011

Robert Greenfield

The right of Robert Greenfield to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All Rights Reserved

No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with the written permission of the publisher, or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright Act 1956 (as amended).

Any person who commits any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84386 917 7

*Vanguard Press is an imprint of
Pegasus Elliot MacKenzie Publishers Ltd.*
www.pegasuspublishers.com

First Published in 2011

**Vanguard Press
Sheraton House Castle Park
Cambridge England**

Printed & Bound in Great Britain

Foreword

Fortune favours the brave...

New Year's eve, 1999, as the clock struck midnight Greenwich Meantime, would apocalyptic talk of the Millennium Bug become a reality? Lack-lustre fireworks fizzled-out over the Thames in a hapless puff of smoke – cringing Royals linked hands with the smug-faced Blairs' under that cursed Dome for a bravado performance of 'Old Acquaintance', and we, two style conscious city boys (an item), were about to embark on a journey beyond our wildest dreams.

The mystery house languishing behind an ancient orchard just beckoned me with a beguiling allure. Was I born to my next calling? Our beloved vintage campervan was packed to the gills in readiness for our furtive escape to a sequestered little hamlet somewhere in North Norfolk.

Who would have believed my story? It became an intense yearning to pen this remarkable roller-coaster adventure in the hope it might inspire others to jump through a window of opportunity and try something different, because a little naïvety can sometimes go a long, long way...

Seven potent years had gone by in a flash in what was to become a pivotal chapter of our lives. There was no going back...

In 2008, Mike and I sealed our relationship formerly in a 'Civil Partnership' ceremony at the famous North Norfolk landmark of the Cley Windmill, subsequently embarking on a dreamy (honeymoon) holiday cruise to Venice.

All was well with the world... in fact I felt like the luckiest guy on the planet even reigniting my old career into a new sideline, which was about to take-off big-time on our return... You see? I had been promised a major contract to interior design a cutting-

edge new hotel in a picturesque Suffolk harbour town. Holly Lodge had no doubt provided an impressive track record for my CV!

But life as always is full of capricious (ill) winds. And suddenly that August, the world fell off its booming economic precipice, because as-you-well-know one of the worst recessions ever; took hold. I lost my contract. It was one of life's great disappointments for me at the time...

I dusted myself down in the belief that as one door closes, another one opens... And yep, my *raison d'être*s became very apparent from my DNA. The opportunity afforded me the time to write 'Samphire Coast'. And I discovered I love to write, but also I found this could be my act of reflection on the human condition...

Subsequently, I started to rummage through a plethora of press cuttings, 'Thank You' cards, comments in our beloved 'Visitors' Book' and reams of scribbled notes in my dog-eared diaries.

I sat at my desk for nigh on a year. I laughed, and I sometimes cried. Mike wondered whom the hell I was talking to at times in a variety of cadenced regional accents from across the nation and beyond. Or was I now getting (Norfolk) Island Fever holed-up in my study...? As I'd act out these scenarios through voyeuristic portals with fond acuity... these little vignettes I simply had to capture into my allegory, as if rescued from some film off the cutting room floor, and now playing in my head like a rolling autobiographic movie.

In all honesty, running an upmarket hotel-type business was never going to be easy, especially for someone of my early morning (lugubrious) disposition. And becoming 'Domestic Gods' was an absolute *must* in a trade that would become such an eye-opener: the hotel inspection rating process, the up-before-god daily breakfast routines, the unexpected (Sod's Law) glitches, the trials and tribulations of it all, and oh yes; **THE GUESTS...** portrayed in Samphire Coast...

An unforgettable array of some of my most memorable encounters, a rogue's gallery of errant personas: 'Guests from

Hell' sometimes **blacklisted** for wreaking havoc within the sanctuary of our Gothic-esque walls. Thankfully those were in a minority! And most were outwardly genteel types, guests of exemplary calibre. But whose staycation with us inevitably impacted our daily lives as well for all sorts of reasons...

Consequently, in my tribute to them all: I have changed their identities, their names, and recreated similar sequential events echoing these episodes to protect these innocents or occasionally the *very* guilty. And any names created to actual living persons are purely coincidental...

Samphire Coast is my unique trenchant foray into both the light and dark recesses of my over-the-counter view at the Lodge. Often narrated in a candid and sometimes tongue-in-cheek regale as believe you me 'A sense of humour was imperative at all times!' albeit set against the most *bootiful* backdrop on the wilder edge of the North Norfolk Heritage coast.

I sincerely hope you enjoy my debut book as much as I have writing it... Your booking is confirmed! Please step onto the *red carpet*... Welcome to the *real* Holly Lodge (UNLEASHED)...

CHAPTER 1

THE VIEWING

'Country House for sale in Norfolk...'

The words leapt off the page from the minutiae of sales blurbs in the property section of the *London Evening Standard* late that dismal Friday afternoon.

My mobile was low on juice, the traffic was nose to bumper at a standstill, and I'd been sitting in the same lousy jam for what seemed aeons pondering this advertisement, whilst yearning for an escape out of this typical rush-hour scramble for the blessed sanctuary behind my own front door.

Norfolk windmills, scarlet poppy fields, and scented purple lavender projected into my senses as a euphoric recall to a trip long ago. Though that might as well have been in another lifetime... I peered hopelessly through the windscreen at the grey concrete monolith overshadowing my faithful chariot. Faceless hoards of shopaholics poured out of the stores, clutching bulging bags of must-have brands, and flowed like seething oil deep into our dark man-made chasms to lubricate the Underground system: the depths of Hades, and the lifeblood to our metropolis.

A break in the traffic ahead, and I veered over to park, albeit on a double yellow; I could see the warden clock me from a hundred yards away or so, so I knew that time was of the essence as I hastily tapped in the unfamiliar code on my mobile. Call it instinct... This house just beckoned.

A lady answered with a broad regional twang. I asked for particulars to the property, and she launched into her perfunctory sales spiel.

I jotted down the details, while I kept a beady eye on the fearsome parking warden edging perilously closer and closer to my vehicle as he dished out tickets with an evil smarmy grin; a gratifying quota to close his day.

“Tha’ is an 18th century farmhouse: five bedrooms, t’ree bathrooms, two large receptions, kitchen, utility, pantry, oover an acre of grounds, an orchard, t’ree self-contained cottages, and oh, a Nissen hut.”

“Huh, a Nissen hut...?” My mind raced with the configuration of the particulars, and her lingo.

“Thur owners run Holly Lodge as a Bed and Breakfas’, and tha’ is located in thur village of Thursford Green near thur North Norfook coas’.” Blimey... that accent was thick as it was broad.

I was really enthused, and all for under a quarter of a million pounds...? So I asked by any chance if I could see it tomorrow at two? She called the owners, it was convenient, and an appointment was set. She would e-mail me the directions that night.

Thursford Green, the name struck a nerve for some odd reason. Visceral curiosity fired my imagination with fanciful images of a mystery house. Perhaps it was a Jacobean manor set in acres of woodland by a lake secretly tucked away from prying eyes? Or an extravagant castellated Gothic mansion: all spires, and turrets, lingering in a solitary nebula as a preserved theatrical set piece; or a handsome Georgian pile with its grand neo classical proportions that would lend itself well to an eclectic mix of today’s contemporary interiors.

Ah, a hopeless romantic fantasizing about my hidden passions for fanciful follies, a throwback to my youthful dreams as I sought solace to escape from my dysfunctional family life, but more about that later...

Finally, I arrived home, dashed across the cobbled courtyard, and headed straight for the kitchen to reheat yesterday’s cooked pesto-pasta dinner, now languishing in the

fridge. I rustled up a hearty salad, and shoved the garlic bread in the oven. The ring tone of my mobile sounded-off, and a text message read “*C-U-in-10-luv-U!*”

I had met Mike on a blind date five years earlier, when I lived in my white minimalist box on Belsize Village, in one of those imposing stucco-fronted buildings. My raised ground floor flat had been a find, and a real steal in the last recession. For three years I had been undergoing a complete cathartic clear out, unloading some messy mental baggage that was cluttering up my life.

Some mutual friends of ours arranged a blind date... Of course I'd always thought these kinds of dates were a long shot, and would never work out into something really special. How wrong was I...?

On 23rd September 1994 at 7pm to be exact, we met up outside ‘American Retro’ in Old Compton Street in Soho: I was immediately struck by his Nordic good looks. And then we hit it off instantly with a familiarity as if we'd known each other for years.

They say opposites attract... indeed we were both from polar opposite backgrounds; he was from the gritty North East, salt of the earth type of folk who had given him a loving secure upbringing, which was probably responsible for his affable, confident, and sincere demeanour, set off by a sexy fresh-faced, blue-eyed cheeky smile. And in no time I was smitten... (The Robert of old emerged from his chrysalis, and learnt to fly-high with true love.)

That night he came in harassed as per usual from his hectic schedule at the salon. I bet the new temp at the front desk had cocked-up the appointments book yet again, causing untold chaos resulting in impossible schedules. I could sense his frazzled angst. He pecked me on the cheek, dropped his bag, sighed and kicked off...

“Five-thirty... that dragon, Frances Fosdyke wafted in huffing, and puffing, demanding a colour...”

“What foil highlights at that time?”

“She’d been asked at short notice to give a speech on contemporary art forms of species threatened with extinction. Very *Zeitgeist*...”

“What sort of a la Damien Hirst...?”

“Aye! And in some bullshit gallery tonight.” He wearily made his way over to the sink.

“She’s not exactly your favourite client is she...?”

I served up supper, Mike freshened up, and we sat down to eat.

“No, I could have literally strangled her, there and then, and despatched her offal remains to be sculptured into a ridiculous exhibit for the Tate Modern,” he chortled.

“Hey, wouldn’t that be ironic...? A star vitrine of a taxidermy Frances Fosdyke an extinct West End cougar, circa 1994: renowned for their fabulous split ends...” I tried to make him see the funny side.

This is what it had become night after night: “Trouble at Mill/Salon.”

Don’t get me wrong... He was a genius at doing hair, had a real natural flair for it, but the repetitive drudgery of his ever-demanding clients, banging on, day-in day-out about their personal problems, meant not only did he have to make them look as gorgeous as can be, but he had to be an agony aunt to their woes too, which was mentally wearing although he’d go into automatic pilot with most.

Mike had been runner-up to the likes of Nicky Clarke and Charles Worthington on a number of occasions for ‘Hairdresser of the Year’, so there was no doubt as to his abilities in this field, but his ambition had somehow hit the buffers. By now with a stable of well-known clients, and celebs to his name, it should really have been *his* title in lights above the door; but I guess he just did not want to commit further to a trade that he was fed up to the eyeteeth with. I knew he wanted out, and I just might have the answer...

“Guess what...? We’re going to see a country house for sale in Norfolk near the coast tomorrow at two,” I said with my usual zeal for house hunting.

“Why Norfolk... huh?” he said quizzically, probing me with his steel-blue eyes.

Often, we’d discuss plans to move to the country, ignited by our many weekends away, so I knew he’d been waiting for me to make waves in this area.

“A good question... well, when I was at Fashion College, about ten of us piled down there to a beach house somewhere near Cromer. I vaguely remember the sharp curvy roads, odd shaped spooky trees, endless beach sands, big, big skies, and that funny old Norfolk lingo. Besides there’s a house for sale that I have one of my feelings for...”

His dark mood switched as if a light had gone on. I could see the cartoon caption spring out above his head outlining his thoughts. ‘*Relocation-Relocation-Relocation*’.

Often on a break away from the Old Smoke, we would jump into our beloved, very retro, pale-blue VW campervan, and head for romantic breaks down to the south coast. Dorset was a particular favourite; we even had our eye on a first floor apartment on the front in Sandbanks over-looking the harbour... Can you imagine? It was going for pittance back then; today it would fetch millions!

The Jurassic coastline was a welcome respite from the intensity of the urban sprawl. Sometimes for a couple of sexy nights we’d end up ensconced in this weird Bed and Breakfast in a fabulously creepy 1930s house sitting high up on a terraced garden beyond a long wooded drive: it kind of felt like an eyrie. There was a huge life-size Japanese Pagoda sitting majestically in the rear garden that would not have been out of place in Kew.

A strange anomaly though was that this Guesthouse had no locks on any of the bedroom doors, and the owner, though very accommodating, had something very disturbingly Norman Bates-ish about his persona. He would actually creep into our room while we were sleeping in, first thing, and leave a breakfast tray. It was bizarre! Nevertheless this peaceful retreat became our special place during those early courting days.

One time though we headed over to Rye in East Sussex, and stayed in a picture postcard ‘Old Vicarage’ overlooking a

graveyard in the centre square, serenaded by church bells fortunately at sociable hours. It was very atmospheric...

Curiously the ever-so charming Landlady reminded me of one of the *Stepford Wives* running her ship to the utmost perfection; she must have been on robotic autopilot always presenting herself with an immaculate radiant smile at all hours.

Apparently she'd been nominated for 'Landlady of the Year' as indicated by the framed certificate prominently displayed in the front hall. And I naïvely thought it must be a cinch running such an establishment. Perhaps, it was here where the seed was sown somewhere in my psyche. And she was my inspiration...?

However, it was dear old Norfolk in the opposite direction that would become a complete departure from our southern coastal adventures.

That fateful Saturday morning came soon enough. We left early full of *Boys Own* eagerness to discover what this enigmatic county might have in store.

Once off the motorway, it seemed the traffic became sparser the more we penetrated this verdant lush county, and the land evoked a wilder edge not often seen in the Home Counties.

Suddenly, we found ourselves immersed beneath great Scots Pine trees, and this is the heavily wooded Breckland area or The Brecks, with its mysterious ancient feel rich in rare flora and fauna. I clocked the sign for the 'Iceni Village' home to tragic Queen Boudicca, who must have stomped these grounds two thousand years ago before her humiliated defeat at the hands of her Roman oppressors, cementing her iconic place in East Anglian myth.

A sign ahead indicated we were fast approaching the market town of Swaffham (once a wealthy Georgian bolt-hole), more recently featured in the TV series *Kingdom* starring the omniscient Stephen Fry, with its skyline dominated by a gargantuan eco wind turbine, which seemed to follow us through the town.

Meandering slowly through the town centre, with its Saturday market bustling in full-flow, we glanced across at the

packed market stalls, studying their provincial wares curiously as we went. Eventually on leaving, it was as if we passed through an invisible gateway that opened onto another panoramic wilderness of gorse-covered heath-land lined with endless lofty trees en route.

“Perhaps, Swaffham might be the last bastion of civilisation here?” I jested. (But really, I pondered scenes from that morose film *The Witchfinder General*, echoing an insular backward culture stuck in a time warp: loitering indignant wart-faced stereotypes, rampant idiocy, dark family secrets, and gunged trousers – held-up with coarse twine... What!! How sad am I? Or is this really the beginning-of-the-end of my sartorial street-cred?)...

Maybe, it was bad ole King John’s fault after all, when he lost the crown jewels somewhere around the Wash; and stigmatised poor Norfolk with England’s bitterness for centuries thereafter... No wonder, (bejewelled) Elizabeth I had her Duke of *Norfolk* beheaded!

Mike smiled curiously (he could always hear the cogs of my mind grinding with my weird stuff) and handed me some chewy sports mixtures.

“Where in God’s heaven are we going...?” He was getting impatient. Although on seeing the beauty of the unspoilt landscape unfold before us, we both swooned at the possibilities...

Deeper and deeper we drove into unknown territory, as we caught another beckoning detour, ‘Castle Acre Priory’ enticing us for a brief stop to explore its enigmatic ruins – a well-preserved monastic site dating back to 1090.

After a pick-me-up coffee in the grounds of the hallowed Priory, we jumped back into our vehicle, eager to get to our destination, excited at the prospect of this sequestered house. Little did we know then that this was to be the beginning of an amazing adventure that would change our lives forever...

“Fakenham, now that would be very suggestive if the A was dropped in favour of a U! Wonder if it’s indicative of its inhabitants?” My sleazy configuration of a town once voted:

‘The most boring in Norfolk’. We looked at each other, and sniggered immaturely. As it happened, one day this place would feature prominently in our new lives, becoming a dependable source for stocking up on supplies from its weekly country market – where anything can be purchased from chicken wire fencing to a chateau-chic armoire with a copious range of delicious fare in between. And all produced locally.

It was one o’clock, and we’d just seen the sign for ‘Thursford Green’ moments away, the excitement was mounting to a crescendo with the prospect of this mystery viewing, however there was still an hour to kill, so we by-passed the little hamlet, and headed up to the coast about six miles away.

Here we found ourselves at Wells-next-the-Sea, where we were confronted by a vast picturesque harbour connected by an estuary, which meandered out for what seemed an eternity to the coast beyond. The sun was high in the dramatic Norfolk sky providing a seamless backdrop to the colourful boats, bobbing on the buoyant dark swell. Some kids were what looked like crab catching on a sea wall as their parents tucked into newspaper-wrapped fish and chips. The entire scene was reminiscent of an old English postcard circa 1956... Making for a vintage hand-painted watercolour catching this traditional utopia in-frame.

As I digested this holiday snapshot, the delicious aromas combining with the pure oxygenated air wafted into our vehicle sending a high-rush of exhilaration throughout my whole being. This was a planet away from the cityscape of our daily grind. We pulled to a stop, and lingered for a while, drinking in the picturesque scene, before Mike broke my reverie announcing it was time to head for Thursford.

Naturally, a secluded hamlet hidden off the motorway would intrigue us. We passed the ‘Thursford Steam Museum’ on our right, and then the small village green on our left, overlooked by a modest Methodist chapel. A charming flint cottage stood on the central reservation, and there were various houses scattered about. But what struck me most was the tranquillity, a peaceful solitude as if we’d been transported to

another time... My atavistic instincts were most certainly aroused.

Maybe this was the last unblemished village vis-à-vis a once green and pleasant land... I mused. Then we saw the faded sign for “Holly Lodge” swinging forlornly in the gentle afternoon breeze; I especially noticed the vacancy sign below, the letters barely legible.

Accidentally I drove past the entrance, and parked on the green verge beneath the great Scots Pine trees lining the boundary to the property like sentinels keeping the world at bay. We were both at fever pitch with the intriguing prospect of our rural idyll as we stole a glance through the magical old orchard that practically screened the entire house save the Georgian bay windows to the lounge.

This fleeting glimpse seduced my heart, which began to race in anticipation of my dreamy fantasy. We looked at each other smugly, smiling with our secret discovery as we reversed to head up the drive.

Slowly, our vehicle emerged onto the forecourt in front of the main building, which was unfolding into the dreariest, plainest, most non-descript property I’d ever seen. My heart sank with heavy disappointment, while the colour drained from Mike’s face.

“Let’s scarper, turn around quick before they see us, this is not my country idyll at all...” Mike became despondent, and slunk back looking deflated.

“Come on... Er... We’ve come all this way, I can fix the house, but the setting is beautifully fixed already...” I said enthusiastically. I was putting on a brave face because deep down I was gutted by the dour kerb appeal of what was supposed to be my dream house.

We approached the front door gingerly, ringing the old pull-bell. A matronly woman named Faye, who was one of the owners, opened the door, and ushered us into the front hall, which apparently had once been a dairy. She instigated an official no-nonsense welcome to Holly Lodge, with a curt smile.

Then, the usual pleasantries were exchanged before we were introduced to the curious tripartite collaboration of her husband, Roy, an ex-police officer, a tall retiring type, and their friend, and business partner Charlotte, a gaunt smart lady with a clipped English accent, who also resided there.

Faye, a feisty woman full of bravado showed us around, first through the gloomy dining room, which she explained was where their guests ate breakfast as indicated by the assortment of tables dispersed throughout the room – a room with the only saving grace of having a lovely view out to the front orchard. And then we were led to a large lounge...

Everything was drab, dowdy, and awfully chintzy. Let's just say Laura Ashley had seen better days... This was an untouched 1970s time warp with so many easy-chairs in the sitting room it kind of reminded me, dare I say of an old peoples' home. The house was devoid of any interior design, basic, and functional with an overwhelming sense of tiredness; it seemed as if they were trying desperately to hold it all together.

As it turned out they had been at the Lodge for about twelve years, where they'd eked out a half-decent living with their Bed and Breakfast business. And obviously these strong-willed ladies had run the Guesthouse with immense vigour, but these period houses are notorious for slurping funds, and along with daily operating expenses in the hospitality business; it must have been tough constantly trying to maintain appearances to placate happy guests.

It was pitiful from room to room. The kitchen was exhausted after years of cooking full English breakfasts, the upstairs bedrooms were truly miserable, with the Spartan master bedroom having a very ominous concave ceiling. I feared for the occupants that slept beneath it.

The master bathroom fared no better. Although huge, it was an interior nightmare, because for me, my pet-hate is 'The corner tub...' And especially the apricot variety with faux gold taps, and to top it all there was one of those dreadful film-star mirrors surrounded by a myriad of light bulbs (very un-eco today). Please don't think me an *Enfant Terrible!* I was well

aware of their predicament, and could see well past these archaic design errors jarring with my keen *decorexix* eye.

“Don’t you think the bath is fabulous?” Faye declared proudly.

“Yes, it’s delightful...” I replied rather lamely.

“I know you don’t like it, it’s OK you can be honest. After all you’re one of those interior design chaps aren’t you? I always watch *Grand Designs* and *Changing Rooms* although some of those schemes are simply airy-fairy-frightening...”

She was standing there with her arms folded glaring at me, and cajoling for a response to her beloved tub. “Well then... out with it!”

“Well, if it were mine, I would distress, and disguise it into a water feature somewhere to be used in the very back of the garden.” Crikey... I surprised myself with my almighty gaffe. That’s it I thought she’s going to throw us out now... Mike scowled at me from over her shoulder.

She burst into rip-roaring laughter. “I never thought of that... Gosh you are imaginative!” She patted me boisterously on my shoulder – she was a tremendous sport about it. Although I felt sick with embarrassment, and I knew Mike wanted to clout me.

Faye led us downstairs, and out into the garden to show us the quaint guest cottages of typical Norfolk flint vernacular like the many enchanting villages we had seen on our way here. Apparently the flint stones indigenous of the region, and once freely available were a cheaper option than bricks for house building by the denizens, thus providing these romantically appealing façades, which are prevalent throughout Norfolk.

The cottages had been converted from the old stable-block, they were a decent size, had some fetching beams, quirky fireplaces, and rustic charm that would appeal to the townies. But boy not only did they feel fusty, but oh so dreary too – typical of the downbeat accommodation synonymous with the most bog standard Bed and Breakfasts. The wall-mounted televisions looked like they had been there since ‘John Logie Baird’ had invented them. The beds were covered with ratty

frilly throws, but what really astonished me was the centre ceiling light in the middle cottage. It reminded of my childhood bedroom – in the style of a hot-air balloon lampshade attached to a hanging basket – housing a brightly coloured cuddly toy, perhaps a rabbit. I did giggle to myself... What must the guests really think of this? (Hardly the chic interior accessory for today's must-have fashionista...) Come on... I'm not being bitchy: kitsch is back! I'm sure none of their paying guests ever mentioned it for fear of embarrassing their lovely hosts.

The rear of the house fared no better either, with its magnolia pebbledash exterior, and odd shaped ill-conceived sunken terrace. And next we explored the back garden, which was completely enclosed in Government surplus chain-link fencing.

“Probably to keep the inmates from escaping...” I quietly suggested to Mike.

“Aye! Very utilitarian...” I could sense he was not overly enamoured with the place. He became more downbeat.

There it was... the curious Nissen barn-hut that could have housed an entire Spitfire fighter-plane or two, as it was practically the size of an aircraft hangar left over from the war years, I presumed. We opened the creaky doors into the vast space stored with all sorts of grumpy-paraphernalia, and numerous wooden crates labelled with all the classic varieties of English apples: ‘Pippins, Granny-Smiths, Coxes, Bramleys etc’. I guess all plucked from their very own orchard.

Amongst the dank bric-a-brac there was an old 1960s lawnmower – very retro... Some beaten-up garden furniture, and a great looking rickety table, that with a bit of tender loving care would grace any farmhouse kitchen admirably. I discovered this was where Roy escaped to, probably for some space from the ladies, becoming his private domain of male preserve to potter around.

The rear garden was a nothingness save the great view out over the farm fields beyond, some more gnarled old apple trees, a gigantic bay tree, a hazelnut tree, some vegetable patches, and a curious tumbledown ruin overgrown with wild flowers.

Completely charming... However, it was the horses grazing in the corner field that stole my heart.

As we ambled back into the house, we were greeted with a welcoming afternoon tea in front of the old Inglenook, which was the only redeeming feature in the lounge although it needed some urgent restoring. And pronto!

Faye sat regally in one of those special therapeutic reclining armchairs, but nearly catapulted out of it when she pressed the side-lever. It was comical – echoing the ejector seat of the 007 Aston Martin... And we had to contain ourselves. However it inspired me with the notion: she was the Queen of this realm on her automated throne...

“What do you think of Holly Lodge then...?” she asked briskly.

“Naturally, there’d be a lot for us to think about here,” I replied tactfully, feeling I had been put on the spot.

I gauged Mike’s reaction, he straightened his shirt collar looking nonplussed, and I could tell he wanted to make a runner, but of course he was polite, and smiled cordially.

Apparently they’d been seriously let down by two potential buyers over the last year; frustratingly pulling out just prior to exchange of contracts, so it appeared they were now desperate for a sale.

Roy came into the room every inch the former cop brazenly gauging our intentions, while Charlotte was flapping about serving tea; I guess they were curious about us too, but worldly enough not to be fussed about our relationship.

“These fresh eggs are for you...” Charlotte handed me a box.

“Our bantam farm eggs are supplied by a generous neighbour with a small holding nearby in the village,” Faye added.

“Oh, thank you... erm – what? Don’t they pop out with a sell-by-date already stamped on them...?” I joked.

Mike rolled his eyes. I could tell he was not impressed by my attempt at some humorous banter here; nevertheless they smiled politely just the same.

As we were leaving, and stood in the unassuming hallway I couldn't help commenting on the sound of the loud moos of the cows from the nearby farm.

"Bless, and sweet calves nearby too!"

Faye responded with her school ma'am lesson on rural life. "Oh dear... the young calves have just been despatched to the slaughterhouse, it's killing season you know; but one does get used to the incessant wailing of their bereft mums..."

"Oops..." I was aghast, and felt like such a chump. An ignorant city boy – sheltered from the realisation – that our cling-film-wrapped supermarket meat really is the result of Kindertransport despatches to farms with the *Auschwitz* factor. And even more riddled with guilt, because I once used to design heaps of leather apparel. I swore there, and then I would become a vegetarian...

We said our farewells, the front door closed. We stood facing the old orchard filled with all manner of trees laden with their fruits. Aside from the copious apple bearers there were Conference pears, Victoria plums, cherries, and a walnut tree – which seemed exotic, as I never knew it grew in this country.

Mike turned to me looking very underwhelmed, whereas I was already visioning that I could create a 'Dream Sanctuary', here. OK, it was all run-down with more than a hint of dearth about its interiors, but what a setting... And those guest cottages were such a bonus; all it needed was an injection of creative genius. I am deft at reinventing things a la mode, these skills had put me in good stead in this rising property market, and culminated in quite a few successes with properties nobody would dare touch. Making them look a million dollars without spending it, that's the trick, and I knew I had it, creating something special everybody would want. The boy was born to his *next* calling...

Naturally this project would be a huge undertaking, but this could be the opportunity of a lifetime in exchange from the sale proceeds of our two bedroom Edwardian garden flat in prime Muswell Hill. And all this could be ours with enough change to develop it into some kind of hotel-deluxe (yep, even manor

houses were going for a song back then). Of course it would have to be a viable going concern, there would be no way this could just be a weekend bolthole; it was far too large, and it could make a fine home too. Mike could give up his dreaded schedule at the salon; we'd be living the dream life in the fresh air of the countryside, with our energies concentrated into developing a new business. I just needed to convince Michael...

"How do you feel, about owning, and running the best boutique B&B in Norfolk?" I asked cock-surely.

Mike looked at me incredulously, gasped, then laughed out aloud, and replied in a John McEnroe-esque way.

"You can't be serious... you cannot... How can we pull it off?"

"Trust me, Mike... we're young enough to give it a go. Besides with our combined talents I know we'll do wonders with this affordable property. It's scary, but a chance to escape polluted, crime-ridden London. Come on... let's be adventurous – to hell with it!" I said gleefully, justifying the gung-ho spirit of my *derring-do* speech.

He sunk into a deep thoughtful silence as we jumped into our beloved VW.... I revved-up, and our favourite Ella Fitzgerald CD serenaded us as we trundled down the bumpy drive. And me...? I was engulfed with a strange feeling deep down in my gut, a magnetic compulsion that somehow this would be the beginning of the rest of our lives...

