



# THE CLANGTHORPE

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There is strip lighting in the barn but tonight the men burn kerosene lamps. The noise is deafening when the man Fisher opens the horsebox door. He comes out dragging the clangthorpe backwards. The rope is lashed over his arm then around his waist and he fights foot by taut foot of it into the barn against the unseen weight, knees jelling and his roustabout grimly set.

Punters stamp again and again on the beaten earth floor and flat-flat-hand the pine boards and corrugated cladding of the walls so the whole echo chamber ruddles and parps like a steam-train caught in the sidings.

Blotto and his hammock hands dangle silverback. He is, say the wicked mothers of those parts, a rough one, which is to say his brugled face is someone's pudding. Blotto likes the drink and on a ran like this he isn't the only man supping at the farm. They all run the night terrors of a clangthorpe sloppy – no one's jane back home in bed waiting forgets the smell of sweat and fear and booze on the man back from a clangthorpe.

Like every todd there, Blotto has eyes only for the stall and what creature might move out. Later that night when he fails a third time to find the fold and slot himself between the sheets, his jane will pull them back for Blotto, face pushed into the pillow dreaming him gone. But her man will hear her snore again before he can find any sleep.

Which is to say a ran between a clangthorpe and another beast its size is a mighty sight to behold and sup on. Each man there watches the slats of the horsebox shudder and the lashing rope with eyes like a bronze foundry, pouring the fury of it all to the brim.

Pinchers mutter into their mobiles, punch numbers and take bets. No pictures in the barn, say the big men behind them, with nasty roustabouts that each have one piece laid on poorly, perhaps with a spade. They will grab any camera-phones off their owners, feeding them into deep overcoat pockets and can't-have-it-back.

Drinking is heavy, so too the press of men in the close-trousered quarters of the barn. Seen from the wooded hills above the Herefordshire valley, a night-time walker might never know this yellow ember in the purple-black hush of night goes for the centre of the known world. Drinking is deep like a cassette player slowed right down and long. At times it is even nostalgic, like the relegated centre back in a faded sticker book. The barn holds the memory of one hundred other ran; the wellingtons and the wax jackets and the vegetable patch of topsides tilted up to the downpour.

Not one ran the same but some remembered more than others. Far above the brooey and the glowering and the gut hunger of waiting men are old bird nests up in the oak eaves, long abandoned by fool swifts robbed of the ran by the gift of flight.

The barn is thirsty and nervous because this is the night the clangthorpe will run a daggle and get done ribways in return. Pinchers on old phones, the phones that don't take pictures, get the nerves and imagine out loud about the clangthorpe while the rope still shudders out with no beast in sight. Some lie through their tiles saying they're looking at it now and it's the dumbest beast they ever saw.

Don't give us that, squawk the phones back in their cold luggers. They're only saying that so we don't go heavy on it.

You've the odds now, so... their pinchers say, tap toes in the pregnant pauses...

A ton on the clangthorpe! shouts John the Gate – in a hospital miles away with his daughter else he'd be there to wave the notes under the man's nose. Don't sell me biscuits when I've come to put a bet on...

And the phone goes quiet as a brick. The told pincher turns it over and over in his hands wonderingly. What, he wonders as he turns it, if... What if every man takes home a piece of the clangthorpe tonight. Will he just close his book and do a proper trade. Call centre, braddocking or supermarket. A flatpack job in a room type of life.

Then the barn rips open in shouts and the pincher knows he couldn't live another way. He heaves jigsaw punters out his way through the jagged puzzle of backs until he comes to a ring of the biggest men in the valley. Ones even Blotto beside him can't move. Rod, Picker, Sam the Cow are like teeth on a castle the tide of smaller men cannot pull down or break over.

For there it is, standing and crouching. Not shrinking away, just braced steel under fur for what might come. At first only the giants at the front can see it. The clangthorpe. Then the others behind them once they draw back. There's no zoo in any land that holds one and for some this is the first time they have ever seen it. No photos exist, just ran nights like these. Comes the silent forward shuffle and slow churning of men front to back, until every man in the barn has stood in the clangthorpe's presence and witnessed it.

They take their moments like a wafer, without a murmur. The only sound under heaven the heaving of the man Fisher roped to the beast; real name never said, though known to the most trusted there, come as he has specially to make the huge fight the fairest it can be.

For all the evening-up that man makes on its behalf, it still is not a night to be a daggle. Or any man somewhere else in the world but this place. Running a daggle against a clangthorpe is a once-in-a-generation kind of thinking and mostly luck. Luck to have both mighty beasts in one place at the same time. Luck the Fisher is there, though probably he always would be while there were legs under him. Luck the opportunity found a showman and a barn sufficient, for only showmen farmers with the thickest wedges and the biggest knees will risk it all.

Away in town, John the Gate knows all this as he cradles the pinkie just born and watches the midnight fog on the other side of the hospital glass. For shame to miss it, but for love too. Behind them his daughter Jenny is propped up on a pillow like a holy thing, bloodied and bruised by the spring tide of life-giving, in a sleep deeper than the murk outside.

What might this little one come to see in his stretch to come? That living can be a clangthorpe and a daggle by torchlight, perhaps. And if his useless father ever comes back to tell him men don't run beasts like they did in his day, or his whiskers' day, then know little man that John the Gate was told the same by his and he by his.

For always it was never as good as it was, all through the way back when to the muffled murdle of old county days and further, to a time before Herefordshire knew its own name. When there was no such thing as counties and all England was just an unnamed island of flowing unending forest. And each man and pinkie living in it deeply just a fleck on one tiny floret of that whole dark green-wooded world.

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What are fifteen years to a forest? Another house or two at its fringes maybe. The world turns fifteen times around the Sun and on four of those summers it shines so well that people almost forget to complain about the heat. On long country days the whiskers watch lads go closhing in the same rivers they did in their day and it feels redolent, like digging into the back of a cupboard.

Those boys and girls who leave home for university and jobs in London or Birmingham come back more than they'd admit. There are families living on the rivers Usk and Wye, even the Monnow, bringing up pinkies in boats and ways not seen since the old times. One narrowboat chunters slow along a bank with a satellite dish nailed to its side: an ear to the world held above slow, tea-brown waters that flow to no timetable and no remote. In town people are asked, where were you when Peggy died in *Eastenders* or Usain Bolt won gold, Paris was attacked, for that hard-house rave in the quarry up Ledbury, when we beat those. Where else, say the boats in the distance, just on the river.

Money is tight all over and even the graduates applying for a job in a warehouse moving Homebase pallets need their elbows and economics. It's just hard, harder than it was for their parents. The parents know it and say so too. They see kids come home from their first working week in the world, eyes down. Only the bastards among them draw their children to the realness of life lessons started. The ones with quiver and love in their words say a life is a long time and things can change.

In these fifteen summers past John the Gate has gone. He dies down by the stream in the shade of a hedgerow among the dog rose and violets, trying to break the death clot with his farmer hands. When they find him and he is lifted up and carried out from the land he was born to and worked all his life, they see his great body stamps a dead man's shape into the iron-red earth.

They do not see though, what the Gate has before he died. It is a something, a perhaps, a fliss and flimmer on the other side of the water, moving so quickly through the trees towards Abbotswood. But the Gate knows what it is.

A few days later, the Fisher gets the news and walks down from his cottage and asks to see where his oldest friend has died. He stands by the spot, still compact days after the dropping. It may be he understands what has happened, but no one asks him and he is not a man prone to leasing empty.

Blotto has another home now and stirs another jane with his late returns. He is mainly happy, other than things seem a little narrower. Meaning the world holds less promise and Blotto has taken on responsibilities in the years since he, Rod, Picker, the others last saw the clangthorpe do a daggle for slaughter. Which is all right and good in the ways of the ran, as clangthorpe aren't buses, more like mayflies or truffles and other things rare indeed and suddenly gone.

Only there'll be no chance of a ran with another clangthorpe. Not for Blotto or any of them. Someone blabbed and one of the last pieces of a shuffle stretching back centuries is done in one rainy night by a red-faced plod come down from Worcester with ten officers. A very average coming together, certainly no clangthorpe about it, nor daggle – the grim icing on the shame that all their hill country tradition curtains on a nothing ran.

The convoy of white police V8 Range Rovers is seen near the village of Llangarron coming north with minutes to spare. A pincher screams out, phone to his lugger and chaos follows dread right down from the eaves. With the Gate dead in the ground, Blotto surprises the clan and himself by leading rabble into order, turned sober as a sergeant when the pincher's call rang out.

Fetch buckets, he screams, sluice the blood, burn the ropes in the barrels, them four into the night woods with the dead beasts.

When the lights blaze into the yard and the uniforms pile through the door, they find thirty less four men toasting their hands over the braziers, shoulders turned to the nonsense incoming fast. Only Picker pays them any mind and it is he does the speaking once the barn has been tossed from loft to straw.

No arrests can be made and there is no evidence for the outsiders to seize and misunderstand. But any victory the barn feels is hollow, and in the months that have followed no two men there that night have run so much as a rat. When a group of them meets by accident in the pub, there is the unspoken air of a forced reunion. They wonder who couldn't hold the guts of it in them.

Someone's jane is the verdict in some pubs and they throw looks at the likely suspects and lean for their drinks with a sigh, seeing clearly how it must have gone. There are plenty of candidates among the odd-jobbers, the gas man, the postie, the builders, the two travellers, the Gate's pincher, big Rod, bigger Picker, and a dozen other cattlemen and farmers who might have loved theirs too dearly for sense. But dear Christ, somewhere down in his nethers every man there knows he's said plenty to his jane about the ran, pushed or otherways. At the breakfast table or in the kitchen at God knows o'clock on a Thursday morning stinking of the barn and giddy with it.

There are idiots among them who still don't understand the secrets of the earth are a man's only on parole. It is no woman blabbed, the men in the barn just don't know who and the truth of it is that they do not wish to. Not Blotto who sits on the edge of a glass for days, mobile phone left in the car, staring down into his drink.

In the slow emptiness of a long winter and in the wake of runner-up moments with fishing rod or shotgun, a weary acceptance falls over those who had been there. In twos and threes they discuss it in private and

the rehearsed yabber comes to bore the tellers telling it. They start to weave over the last clangthorpe, the one the Gate missed for his grandson. Then in their turn the older men weave over the great clangthorpe forty years past that ran two daggles in a night, never done before. Not spent, some wonder the truth of their whiskers' story of the clangthorpe said to have torn the tongue out a giant, unstoppable bull-mastiff an old showman squire of Bernithan Court laid on for the ran.

The stories fall over all of them like a shrugging of ways and as the long nights necklace, the men of the county slowly nudge themselves towards the times that don't allow for the death the ran hungers in.

It's done with, Blotto tells the Fisher. They stand in his cold yard below Abbotswood a few days after the raid. The old man has not come to a ran since the clangthorpe fifteen years before. But Fisher is the ran in those parts and he must be told.

Back in The Boar after, Blotto scratches some etchings of Drum into a rollie and talks smokingly of how the Fisher looks up the hill with the news, towards the wood it seems, stood like that in silence until Blotto realises there's no more to say. Where he leaves out down the hill to join the valley path, them and this pint now in hand.

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One spring a few years later Mike the Gas says he has been up to Abbotswood Cottage and found the Fischer poorly, God knows for how long in bed because he's barely speaking too. Blotto feels the eyes of the snug turn to him, resents it then catches himself.

Blotto, Rod and Sam the Cow who rents the Fisher's southern fields, drive up to the house that night. All they need to know is said by the old hound on the steps, no marrow left to even bark at the stealers come out of the dark. Things aren't better inside, old magazines clutter every surface and meagre meals shivering bluebottles sit about on unlikely shelves. But the fire is banked up well, there is wood in the basket

and a letter on the dresser with the tea set, addressed to John the Gate. It seems newly written but the Gate is many years dead.

When they find him in a small bedroom at the back they are pleased to see he is not dead, just old and cold. Blotto asks him what the letter is for and they explain to him about the Gate again and again until they think he understands. It is a solemn scene, three big men in a little room at the foot of the blankets. The walls around them are ribboned with damp and if these are the Fisher's last days, to the younger men they feel unbearably grim and lonely under the deep tock of the hollow clock out in the hallway, as old as Herefordshire. The silences between their questions and his rambling answers become hard to endure until suddenly the Fisher pulls a hand out the covers and waves them closer. Get me John the Gate's boy. The one born on the ran.

This puzzles the three as they go. But it is what the note in the envelope says in neat letters, all lower case: 'john, bring me over your grandson, the one born on the ran. come on a warm evening next week when I can walk enough to show him abbotswood. your friend, graham.'

The boy gets the call from Blotto who he knows from his mother is the big man with the brugled face who wears the scarecrow's jacket in summer. Blotto knows the boy from the rugby club, he is one of those centres who dummies into nowhere, shrugs the shoulders out of tackles and leaves hands husking air. A wallop in the hit too, cutting the bigger lads down. 'Teckers' say the boys when the teacher says technique. Look at his technique.

Blotto walks the boy up the valley path from the road, a good mile of coppiced birch and alder under the odd field oak or fat chestnut. Follow alder for water is the saying, and that same stream the boy's grandfather the Gate died by follows the path all the way.

This is new wood, says Blotto for conversation in the awkward silences. But Abbotswood is ancient. The boy seems interested, so Blotto explains how any large

woodland like this coppice is maintained, worked like a crop, cut down and renewed. He says woods are victims of their own size. But there are hundreds of smaller ones in the county less than six hectares in size that have been left well alone by mankind. Or at most had pigs run in them and foraged for deadfall. In Abbotswood above their heads now the real timber has been left to grow old and titan.

It is funny to think, says Blotto in a wandering to the boy, that wilderness is now the smaller piece of the world than people, but for most of history it was much bigger than towns and fields and all other human work and brooey. He chuckles and stops for a piss.

On the track the boy studies the road, sees how the rain has fallen in the night, pooling in the ridges of the old Land Rover tread. Blotto walks him up further until they are in sight of the old stone cottage. They say goodbye and the boy cannot be sure but the man seems to be half-skipping back down the path, clods of earth dancing off his going.

At the cottage door the boy is unsure of himself, whether to wait. The mutt by the steps pays him no mind and could be dead but for the slow-bellows of its grey side.

You knocking? says the Fisher, there in the yard behind him the moment he wasn't not.

No, just listening. The old man grins at the answer. He looks like a briar twined on a hazel stick.

Tom, intit? The Fisher's voice is softer than the boy thought it would be. The man walks them out the old buildings up the hill path above the potato field and after a time they stop by a stile. The Fisher taps the boy's coat. No yellow in the wood. Who takes it off and leaves it hanging by the hood on a post. Then the boy helps the old man over the fence and where he thinks will be flesh he grips only bone through the sleeve. They step into a rising meadow, no path here, and climb through the dewy grass to the fringes of Abbotswood and when the boy looks back, the yellow coat looks like a lost child down in the valley.

The Fisher motions and they duck through a scrabble of hawthorn and almost immediately the climb has become a slope down a slippery bank and a doorway of low scrubby branches opens inwards into a forest of copper beeches, small-leaved limes. Space and light. The whole air fusts with the smell of breath, theirs, the soil's, the decomposing mulch's. Perhaps even the trees. The air is warmer here than the meadow and there is not a lick of wind. The boy can hear the muttling of beetles underleaf and all at once he feels happy to be out and not too cold, coatless as he is.

When Abbotswood was young, there weren't fields. Weren't abbots either. Oaks grow for three hundred years, live another three hundred, then die for the same three hundred. Yew trees are older still. There's trees standing in Herefordshire were here when the Normans came. There'll be trees like that when there's no Normans left in the world. Your grandfather used to say that. Tickled me that did.

The old man is setting a pace as he talks and the boy pays careful attention to his feet and the words coming softly at him. They go deeper into the wood. The boy senses it is as much for his todd as him that the old man is weaving. He knows all about the Fisher, because he grew up liking stories more than most and always listened to the Gate's. He was raised in the ran and knows about the rope and all about the clangthorpes of the past, like he does the kings of England at school.

The boy even knows about the raid a few years back and how it meant the robbing of the ran from him and the other boys not old enough to see it and now passed by. He has the threads of most of why he's here but something is still missing.

They come to a rise deep in the wood and on it is a small hide made of lashed hazel cane covered in rotten bracken. It is living with beetles and comes up from the forest floor as much of a creature as man-made thing. After they move into it and crouch on two logs they can look over a clearing and on to where the trees are thinner and the pinprick of bluebells stretch far into the wood.

We can wait here until gloaming when the light's dying just right. He'll come down and go dig up some nice juicy things from under the big dead ash there. We sit quiet for an hour we'll see him. So best we get our talking done now. *Okay.* I brought you down here because the ran's done for now. You know that. *Yeah.*

But the ran's not all there is. The clangthorpe is. And me, I was the man who caught it, see. Did the Gate tell you that? *No.* Clever man see. Can't tell people for people blab. Look at the ran now. *How you catch a clangthorpe then? Wait for them? Traps?* This the only place you can catch him boy. *It's a family of them then? Babies?* Only ever been one clangthorpe boy. Always, always. Yes. See I looked the same as you when they told me.

Photography from *Something Like A Nest* by Andy Sewell