



Part IV

Our greatest journeys end at
the place where they began, and
we see it for the first time.

Epilogue

By field and hedgerow II

I split my firewood so it has a year in the warm, sunny north facing shed to dry out and season. After that it's hardened up, much lighter, and takes fire easily, burning bright and clear. There's a lot of pleasure to be had in a good stack of wood, and as the old timers say, it warms you twice — once in the cutting, and a second time in the hearth. It's a pleasure to know it's there, waiting for those cold nights when the winter rain is falling on the tin roof of the old farmhouse.

Moving the wood is more of a chore than cutting it. Taking it up to the house I'm reminded that my right knee will give way one day. The signs are there, the result of carry-outs that were too much for the likes of me. It isn't just the extra weight, but the way carrying a load makes placing your feet so much harder. That's what does the real damage.

The chicken house is not far from the wood shed. Not long ago we found a stoat there, no doubt sizing up a potential meal. He bounded off in that sinuous bouncing gait they have. He's proving elusive, but we'll cross paths again.

When the young pup goes through the gate of the home paddock on a hard frosty morning, he'll often put up a hare we have come to know. Bounding stiff-legged and ears erect, she looks for all the world like a tiny antelope. I know her escape route and sometimes put myself on it, dropping to a crouch in the rye grass.

Today she bounded away from the dog out of his sight and, busy watching behind, came by me at arm's length, just touching my outstretched wrist. I doubt the trick will last, but it's good to be able to think just as she does and to see her so close, her long whiskers standing out from her dew-wet face like those of a cat.

It's a great place to watch the seasons come and go. In the late summer showers pass fleetingly over golden fields of wheat and barley. At other times there is new-mown hay, the small bright streams rich and green with sunlight, or the berries of the hedges black and shining. It's a bit like the place I grew up — not quite the same, of course, but close.

In a place like this everything a puppy chances upon is new and exciting. It's a fine thing to go for a walk with a young dog, to see the world through his eyes for a little while. I'm happy to take him for a stroll by the river, where he can run and puzzle out a few mysteries among the fallen leaves while I watch the water go by. I trust his nose completely and seldom correct him for following his instincts. He was born knowing more about game than I ever will.

There are trout here, mostly browns. In the spring they come in from the sea to slash for whitebait. There is an occasional rainbow. There's always the chance of a pheasant, or a young rabbit or two. There's usually something to see, maybe a flight of geese fluting their way downriver in the teeth of a cold southerly, or some quail making a jittery run for their favourite cover, the blackberry tangle under the old seedling apple. If we don't come home with anything, that's okay. It's still a happy thing to do today, and a fond memory for tomorrow.

Yesterday, while the pup chased around the lupins, I watched a lark high above us. He threw himself ever upwards towards the sun, singing as though his tiny heart might burst. I doubt any creature has ever been more fully alive than that tiny bundle in those few brief seconds. It's a salutary lesson, to see such a vivid spark burning in a thing so small, held for a fleeting moment against the infinite pale blue.

It's tempting to relive the old days, and from a distance they come with a better perspective. I had my wins and took the beatings that must come with them. I was never as good as the best fly-fisher, tracker, marksman or dog-trainer. There was always too much to do, so many different disciplines that to master them all was impossible. It was enough for me to be the bumbler, Mr Nobody from Nowhere, who loved it all and never gave up, not once. Maybe there's a kind of honour in that.



Our son was born one cold spring day when the wind blew the new daffodils and the cherry blossom. I remember handing him to VJ when he was only a few moments old. James is sitting on my knee right now, as I slowly write these words.

It's a sobering thing to be the span between past and future. My father was among the last to clear timber by hand, work a pitsaw and plough with heavy horses. In his life he saw mankind step on the moon. I can't dream of what our son will see. He's a happy kid with an easy smile, and it's my job, I guess, to help him keep that as he grows up. An hour ago we were playing with his toys, cars and trucks and all the usual things. Among them is one that doesn't fit, a Canada goose. He picked it out of the pile and played with it for a while, the sunlight streaking brilliantly all around him. 'Ducky?' he said. I agreed.

Out of curiosity I took the goose and hid it among the pile of other toys. He pulled it out of the bunch straightaway and pushed it toward me again, as though it was the most important thing in the world. We played the game one more time, with the same result. 'Ducky' he said, this time with great and final certainty.

Oh boy. Here we go again.

Son, if you do go down that road — and I'll never push you to — then you'll probably need a bunch of rods and reels and rifles and such. Lord knows what they'll cost by the time you grow up. Or maybe you'll need some new ones, and someone to take the photos.