

# Goodbye, Hello

I MET UP WITH MY OLD FRIEND Danny after years away. A long time ago we hunted birds almost every weekend of the season over Saxon and Daylie, our two shorthairs. We were pretty slick by the end of it, nice solid points and good backing, the unspoken teamwork that comes with countless hours in the field. Since then those dogs have had pups and have grown old, and their pups have hunted too. Theirs was a good, strong line.

Danny had one of those young dogs with him. She saw a stranger, but to me every line on her face was shockingly familiar. Her expression, the cast of her eyes was identical to my old Saxon. He lies deep under a tree at home, but somehow here he was again. It was disorienting, like looking into the face of a good friend who doesn't recognise you. Stare at me all you want, little one. I've seen those eyes before.

I know your next move before you do. I know the soft mouth you have on birds, and the hound voice you will only ever find on big game. The *umschlag*, the circling flush, will be your strength and hares will be your weakness. I know already the petty crimes you'll commit and the good heart you have in you.

We went out into the hills on a crisp winter morning to an old haunt. An hour later and the youngster locked up into a solid point. I walked in as I had done so many hundreds of times before with her ancestors. On birds she trembled all over, wide eyes riveted to a spot just ahead, breathing them in as though they were life itself. I knew exactly what would happen next. On the flush she swept around them at a fast run, then pounced in towards me without knowing why, except that it is what she is made to do.

These birds and this dog had not been alive when I last stood in this place. Whole generations had come and gone since, but in a way nothing had changed. It wasn't a sad reminder at all. With that little moment the world somehow seemed so much brighter.

We worked on into the morning, through tawny dew-laden grass and thick cover. It was confusing to walk into something new but at the same time so deeply familiar. More than a little dazed from a long pre-dawn drive, I stepped into each point like a man walking in a dream. I don't say that lightly.

Because that's what we all dream — we who have left a great heart behind — to walk with them again, just one last time.

