

Day 8 - 0 miles (at least by bike) - 546.7

And it did, at least at first. Rain, that is. My laundry was not going to get particularly dry that morning in Gordon's garden. Although I could have slept in as late as I'd liked, I woke up wide awake at 7am and made my way downstairs. Gordon, ever the farmer, was already up and greeted me by asking me why I got up so bloody early. Although thoroughly conscious, I was unable to provide much of a coherent answer, and shruggingly sat down to a cup of strong tea. Gordon was impressed that I opted for the full cream 'proper milk', rather than the 'watery skimmed rubbish' that Jan favoured. Gordon and Jan had their milk delivered daily in glass bottles, one of the many ways in which both of them, Gordon aggressively, Jan subtly, clung to the traditional elements of a farming life. As much as they could they were holdouts for a way of life that was, as Gordon dreaded, dying out, but had a special resonance for me.

When I was growing up on the rural outskirts of Edmonton, Alberta, my parents' best friends were the Hansens, a farming family who lived near Lumsden, Saskatchewan, a little ways outside of Regina, in the stunning Q'Appelle Valley. We usually visited their farm twice a year, once in the summer and once around Thanksgiving in October. Those visits impressed upon me both the romance and the hard reality of a farming lifestyle. I loved the farm: the smells, the sounds, the way my 'Uncle' Dave's hands were always coated with a grey mixture of dirt and engine oil and yet always seemed clean and welcoming at the same time. I loved the towering prairie skies, the way farmers looked at the horizon and the way food tasted after working in the fields all day to try to grow it. I also knew that farming was also full of heartache, most notably year upon year of drought, financial uncertainty and, having participated in harvest when I was about 18, bloody hard work. Something about it still connected with me deep inside; it just felt right somehow.

All of these feelings flooded back to me when Gordon and I drove out to one of his stockyards to feed his cattle. Although Dave was primarily a wheat farmer and Gordon was a cattleman, each represented a unique connection to the land. Gordon essentially bought young cattle at auctions, reared them on his fields and in his barns and then sold them for slaughter. On one level, it could be seen as a fairly brutal, grim and unromantic link in the food chain that resulted in a steak or a hamburger. The cattle he bought were primarily investments, a wager that he could fatten up an animal to the point where he'd make a profit. And yet I could tell that his cattle were much more to Gordon than mere commodities to be exploited. He cared for them in a way possibly only particular to other farmers, the way Dave cared about his young shoots of wheat or canola. More importantly, Gordon saw himself as part of a much larger, much more fundamental process. He

was connected to a tradition, transcending time and culture, of rearing animals to fill the bellies of others. In many ways Gordon had more in common with an Argentinian rancher or Kenyan goatherd than he did with a pencil pusher 9 miles away in York.

‘You had to be born into farming’, Gordon asserted as he showed me the proper way to pour feed, balancing the bucket over his shoulder and walking from one end of the trough to the other, letting the grain spill out evenly as he went. Not only did farming require a lifetime of knowledge, but also, and crucially, it required the type of passion that was bred in the bone. No one would do it otherwise. I mentioned to Gordon that, in another life, I could have been a farmer, that I had at least a morsel of that passion for the land that the life demanded. He smiled and said that he believed me, but that I should resist the urge. ‘There’s no money in it now-a-day’.

After returning from the stockyard, we got ready for a day trip to the Yorkshire Dales. I had been hoping Gordon would offer to take me on another crazy trek through the country, as he had years before, and was hoping that the Dales would be as captivating as the North York Moors. There had been many highlights of that trip: sneaking into Whitby Abbey, because there was no way Gordon was going to pay for his heritage, followed by the best fish and chips on the planet; nearly getting carried away by a gushing ford; hearing Gordon wax eloquent about everything from dogs’ bollocks (literally) to multiculturalism. I wasn’t to be disappointed.