

1

IT HADN'T STOPPED raining all summer, and the narrow stream that divided Limeburn ran deeper than Ruby Trick had seen it in all of the ten years she'd been alive.

The ditch that marked the crease in the gorge usually held a foot of tumbling, tuneful water. Enough to wet your knees but not your knickers.

But this summer was different. This summer, the sun had only shone apologetically through short gaps in the dirty Devonshire clouds, and the stream was fast and deep and dark. And although Adam Braund could still jump from one mossy bank to the other if he had a run up, the children all gathered to watch him now because if he fell in, it was just possible that he might drown.

The lane that rose a steep, curling mile through the forest to the main road was always mirrored with wet, while the cobbles between the cottages closest to the slipway had never lost their green winter sheen. The trees that threatened to push Limeburn's twenty-odd houses into the greedy sea below never dried out. Leaves dripped even when the sky did not; the stream spewed from the cliff face like a fire hose, and the steep dirt footpaths that escaped Limeburn through the woods were nothing but lethal slides.

Not that that stopped anyone, of course.

There were only five children in the village so they were forced

to be playmates, just as they were forced to live in this dank place that smelled of kelp.

Chris Braund was the eldest at thirteen. His brother Adam was a year younger, but a year taller. The Braunds were descended from Armada sailors washed ashore, and they all looked like gypsies. Then there was Ruby with her shock of red hair. After her came seven-year-old Maggie Beer and her two-year-old sister, Em, who slowed them all down. Both were stick thin and see-through pale. Maggie had to linger for Em, the boys went on ahead, while Ruby was always left somewhere in the middle.

To the west they were allowed to climb the path through the forest to the stone stile. In a small clearing there, a bench on the cliff looked out through a leafy frame and over the black pebble beach to the Gore. The Gore was a slim, flat spit that jutted a hundred yards into the waves before turning abruptly and stopping. It was said that the Devil had tried to build a bridge across to Lundy Island, but had been thwarted when his shovel broke.

Ruby didn't like the Gore or the story.

They made her wonder where the Devil was now.

Hanging from an ancient oak beside the bench was a loop of fraying rope where they could swing – if they wanted to burn their palms and fall in the mud. Still, they did swing more often than not, because that was all there was to do.

Sometimes Chris and Adam climbed over the stile and went on up the pathway. 'All the way to Clovelly!' Chris had boasted on several occasions, but when Ruby had asked him to bring her back a toy donkey from the visitor centre, he said they'd run out.

Ruby never went past the stile. 'That far and no further,' her mother had warned her. That was partly why. The other part was that, even on a sunny day, the woods beyond the stile were too dark and too quiet – a tunnel of green with the threat of the unseen drop on one side, and tangled undergrowth rising on the other.

The pixies in the woods would lead you in circles – even right off the cliff – if they could. You'd have to turn your coat inside out to keep them away.

At the foot of the Clovelly path was a small stone beehive-shaped hut. They didn't know what the hut was supposed to be for, but they called it the Bear Den because even in the dry it smelled like bears. The children took turns to squeeze through the tiny door and sit in the dark with their knees tucked under their chins for as long as they could stand it.

Adam held the record, which was ages.

To the east, the Peppercombe path was even steeper – a switch-back of mud and wooden planking in a makeshift staircase between clinging brambles.

Halfway up was the haunted house where they weren't allowed to go. They spent much of their time there, picking among the cinders in the fireplaces and knocking glass from the empty windows at low tide, to hear it tinkle on the wet pebbles a hundred feet below. Each year the worm-chewed floor juttied out further and further over the disintegrating drop. There was one place where Ruby could lie with her eye to a knothole in the floor, where there was nothing between her and the dark grey sea.

It was like flying.

Or falling.

Ruby Trick lived in a tiny two-bedroomed cottage called The Retreat. It was owned by a family in London who had bought it and named it and then found it was too distant, too dreary, too damp to retreat to – even just once a summer – and had rented it out until they could sell at a profit.

That was never going to happen. The Retreat would cost less to demolish and rebuild than it would to repair. Ruby's father, John Trick, hammered bits of scrap wood into draughty window frames, and slapped filler at the widening cracks in the walls,

but each year The Retreat fought a losing battle against nature.

The forest didn't want them there – that was plain to Ruby. While Clovelly kept it at bay with size and industry – and, ultimately, brute tourism – Limeburn was just in its way. The stream and the road and the thin line of houses were never going to be enough to keep the trees on *this* side of the coombe joining the trees on *that* side. It was only a matter of time. The advance party was already established. Ferns sprouted from stone walls like little green starfish, while rhododendrons and hydrangeas crowded back doors and shrouded rear windows. And, even as the trees surrendered their branches to loppers and chainsaws, so they tunnelled sly roots under enemy lines, breaking through pipes, loosening foundations and shifting walls out of true. In Rock Cottage the living-room floor had bulged and finally splintered to reveal a root of oak as thick as a man's leg. They'd all been in to look, and to help old Mrs Vanstone rearrange the furniture around it.

John Trick always said there were some things you just couldn't stop. Already the houses further up the hill had been swallowed by the forest, their stone hearths now washed with rain, and home only to spiders and bloated toads, while the houses that were left had nowhere to go but the sea, which gouged relentlessly at the cliff beneath them.

The long, curved slipway tempted the water up into the village, and sometimes it came. During spring tides and storms, sandbags were packed tight behind wooden slides in the doorways, and people took their heirlooms and TVs up to bed with them, just in case.

By day, it was easy to forget that the trees and the ocean were lying in wait. By day the children played in the woods and stepped gingerly across the giant pebbles on the beach to paddle in the rockpools.

But by night Ruby could feel the tides tugging at her belly, while

the forest tested The Retreat, squealing against the glass and tapping on the tiles.

And she wondered what it would be like – when the outside finally broke in.

2

JOHN TRICK DROVE them up to the main road to get the bus – Ruby to Bideford, her mother only as far as the hotel, from where she brought home leftovers so good that Ruby would sometimes get up in the middle of the night to finish them off.

Their car, once white, was now frilled with rust. The car seemed to hate them as much as the forest did, and sometimes wouldn't start. When it did, it coughed and jerked all the way up the winding mile.

The hill from Limeburn to the main road was like a ride. Ruby had been to the fair once in Bideford. The rollercoaster had been small, but big enough to frighten her, and it had started like this – with a grindingly slow pull up an incline that had looked like nothing from the queue, but which had felt so steep once she was in the little cart that she'd thought she might flip over backwards.

They were always tense in the car – waiting for it to fail. Her father hunched over the wheel, her mother gripped her bag in her lap, while Ruby's fingers ached, she clutched the headrest so tight. They all leaned forward, as if it would help, as the car lurched in bad gears around hairpins, under the murky canopy of green.

Halfway up was a stable made from an old railway carriage, and a tiny paddock of mud. There was never anything in there, but Ruby always looked.

'That's where I'll keep my horse,' she said five times a week.

'What will you call it?' her father always asked.

‘Depends,’ Ruby idled, ‘on its colour and nature.’

‘What if it has a name already?’ asked her mother. ‘You can’t change it.’

Ruby frowned. She hadn’t thought of that.

‘She can call it anything she likes, can’t you, Rubes?’ said her father in the mirror. Then he shook his head and murmured, ‘Spoilsport.’

Ruby liked it when Daddy told Mummy off. Mummy was too big for her boots, with her fancy job at the hotel and her fancy chef’s uniform. Showing off – that’s what Daddy called it.

They passed the stone chapel where thick ivy knitted the graves together, then surfaced from the cover of trees into daylight, next to the little shop where Ruby spent her pocket money. There was a sign that promised ice cream – although the freezer was always full of fish fingers and frozen peas – and a wire cage by the door that held a local newspaper headline to the wall. It changed once a week, or whenever Mr Preece remembered to do it. Today there was a FLOOD THREAT TO 1000 HOMES.

The car juddered to a halt and they clambered out. Ruby had to wait for Mummy to get out because there were only two doors. She could see a small knot of children already at the stop. They were divided between above-the-hills, who came from the clifftop farms and hamlets, and below-the-hills, from the beaches and the forest. Aboves had wifi and ponies; belows piled sandbags in their doorways against high tides, and their hair was always matted with salt.

Before she closed the door, Mummy bent down to look back into the car. ‘Could you try to see about the bathroom window, John?’

Ruby rolled her eyes. Mummy was always going *on* and *on* about the window! Why didn’t she fix it herself if she was so bothered?

‘If I get time,’ said Daddy.

‘What else do you have to do?’ said Mummy, and Daddy leaned

over and pulled the door shut. Then he turned the car round in a jerky circle, and sank beneath the trees.

The above-the-hill kids waited for her mother to get off the bus before they called Ruby 'fat bitch' and 'ginger minger', and stepped on her black shoes and white socks until they were good and muddy.



John Trick was twenty-nine and had not worked for three years.

He used to do welding at the shipyard, and when there was no welding he'd done scaffolding, and when there was no scaffolding he'd done labouring, and when there was no labouring, he'd started to do nothing at all.

Then he had done nothing at all for so long that he'd gradually adjusted, until nothing had become the new something.

The new something was the drive up the hill and back and breakfast in front of the TV. It was combing the beach for driftwood, and surprising limpets for bait. It was a six-pack of Strongbow cooling in a rockpool, and pissing in the sea like a castaway.

After a while, he wondered how he'd ever found time for a job.

And on days like this, that suited him just fine. The morning rain had stopped and the cloud had thinned so that it only diluted the sunshine, rather than blocking it out completely – a reminder that, somewhere up there, summer was as it should be. The sheltered cove was always warmer than the clifftops, and the moisture was already leaving the land for the sky again in steamy wisps.

Through cheap earpieces, Johnny Cash and Willie Nelson sang to him of real men and the women who'd wronged them. Sometimes – when the wind was up – he'd join in.

Short snatches of songs carried off on the spume.

He had collected half a dozen limpets and now dug one out of its shell with his penknife and put it on the hook. The outer flesh was tough, and the creature pulsed in his fingers as he threaded it over the barbs.

He cast and felt the weight touch the bottom, then he took up the tension on the line, and settled back into his old nylon camping chair.

John fished mostly at the Gut – a squareish wound blown out of the rock with gunpowder two hundred years before, so that ships could land their cargoes of lime and anthracite. The kilns where the lime had been burned were still there, built into the sea wall either side of the slipway – fortress-like stone ovens forty feet high that were now occupied by rats and by gulls, and so acrid with the shit of both that not even the children played there.

Mackerel was his most common catch, with whiting a close second. Both were good enough eating, and if he bothered to pick his slippery way to the end of the Gore, he could catch eels as long as his arm, and dogfish. Rock salmon, they were called in fancy restaurants, and sometimes Alison rang Mr Littlejohn at the hotel and he'd say yes or no. If he said yes, he gave Trick a tenner a fish. Then cut them into eight thick steaks that he sold for twenty quid a time.

John snorted around his roll-up. A hundred and sixty quid for a fish *he* caught and his *wife* cooked. He failed to see how Mr Littlejohn could sleep at night, for the thieving old bastard he was.

He could have sold the dogfish to the Red Lion in Clovelly, of course, but he never went to Clovelly, even though he could see it from here, across the shallow curve of the bay. Clovelly was the favoured brother to Limeburn's runt, and nobody in either village ever forgot it.

The fluorescent end of the fishing rod shivered, and he tensed,

ready for action. But the tip pinged back into position, pointing skywards with a trembling finger.

John subsided.

Bloody crabs.

Sometimes he would reel in and check the bait and cast again somewhere else, but it seemed like a lot of work when the air was so warm and the cider so cool.

He closed his eyes and waited.

He slept.



That night the window row began again. First the window, then how much the new tyre on the car had cost, then the mess Daddy had made cleaning the fish in the sink. Ruby went into the other room before it could get to the job.

Wherever the row started, it always ended up at the job.

It got there without her.

3

MISS SHARPE WROTE two words on the whiteboard and Ruby copied them carefully on to the cover of a brand-new blue exercise book.

My Dairy.

‘You should write in your diaries every day,’ said Miss Sharpe, to groans from the boys. She put down the marker pen and walked up and down between the desks. Ruby liked it when Miss Sharpe walked about, because it made it harder for Essie Littlejohn to poke her with a pencil. Essie’s daddy owned the hotel where Mummy worked and Ruby hated her, with her big ears and her good crayons and her fancy mains gas.

‘All the things you do, and the thoughts you have,’ Miss Sharpe continued. ‘All your secret dreams and plans for the future.’

Ruby noticed that she had pale pearl varnish on her short nails. Ruby wasn’t allowed to paint her nails because only slags painted their nails, but Miss Sharpe didn’t look like a slag. She had ugly brown hair and no make-up, and her only jewellery was a bracelet that tinkled with charms, including a little silver horseshoe. Ruby liked the horseshoe, and – by extension – Miss Sharpe, so she didn’t see how Miss Sharpe could be a slag. Maybe nail polish was only slaggy if it was a French manicure, like the girls from the college, who smoked on the bus.

Miss Sharpe saw Ruby looking at the charms and smiled her

lopsided smile. She had only been here since the beginning of term, so she hadn't had time to get miserable yet.

David Leather put up his hand and asked if he could write about his milk-bottle collection and Shawn Loosemore asked if he could write about smashing up David Leather's milk-bottle collection, and everyone laughed – apart from David and Miss Sharpe, who had to clap her hands to make them all be quiet.

'Of course, David. Hobbies, or what you did at the weekend, or what you want for your birthday, or your pets. It will be like Facebook, but just for 5B. Then,' she said, 'those who want to can read their diaries out in class, and we'll be able learn about each other's—'

The bell rang and Miss Sharpe had to raise her voice over the scraping chairs.

'—everyday lives! Have a lovely weekend everybody!'

Ruby stuffed *My Dairy* into her plush pony-shaped backpack, then trailed out of the classroom behind the others.

The other kids had no interest in her *or* her everyday life.

Writing it down wouldn't make any difference.



Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Cowboy.

Cowboy Night was the best night of the week.

On Cowboy afternoons, Ruby would get off the bus and go into the shop to spend her pocket money under the suspicious eye of Mr Preece. She didn't like Mr Preece, who had hair curling from his ears, and eyes that looked too big behind thick glasses. She took an age every Friday to buy the same two things: a Mars bar and a copy of *Pony & Rider*, which were her treats for the week.

By the time she reached the little chapel, she'd always eaten the Mars bar.

Pony & Rider lasted longer, and Ruby ambled down the hill,

envying the pretty girls with their long legs wrapped around immaculate ponies, and looking for good pictures to cut out and stick over her bed, until it became difficult to see by the miserly light that the forest allowed. Then she hurried the rest of the way to Limeburn, letting gravity speed her home.

Daddy sucked spaghetti into his mouth in long strings that were still attached to his plate, and Ruby did the same, but Mummy said 'Ruby!' and made her stop. *She* wound her spaghetti around her fork so that it was like putting a knot of wet wool in your mouth. It wasn't half the fun.

'Mmm,' said Daddy, 'that was great, thanks.' He leaned back and played the drums on his tummy. Sometimes Ruby had to guess what song.

'More?' asked Mummy.

'Please.' He made the most of a burp and Ruby giggled. Daddy could say 'Bulawayo' before finishing a burp. He laughed too; Daddy was always in a good mood on Cowboy Nights.

Mummy got up and crossed to the stove. Daddy watched her all the way. When she got back with the second plateful, he said, 'What's the occasion?'

'What?'

'New shoes.'

Mummy looked down as if they were a surprise to her too.

'Oh,' she said, pushing her hair behind her ear.

Ruby leaned off her chair to see the shoes. Mummy always wore flat ones because she was too tall. These were far from flat, and had lots of thin straps. They looked like the shoes models wore in magazines.

'Mum gave me some money for my birthday,' said Mummy. 'You remember.'

'That was months ago.'

'I haven't had time to go shoe shopping.'

‘Bit high, aren’t they?’ said Daddy.

Mummy looked under the table at her feet. ‘They *are* a bit higher than they felt in the shop. I just thought it would be nice to have one good pair just in case . . .’ She tailed off.

‘In case of what?’ said Ruby.

‘Just in case we went out somewhere,’ she shrugged.

Daddy sucked up the new spaghetti.

‘Can I have some more spaghetti too?’ said Ruby.

‘What’s the magic word?’ said Mummy.

‘*Please.*’

‘Are you still hungry?’ said Mummy. ‘That was a big bowl for a little girl.’

‘Let her eat if she’s hungry,’ said Daddy.

‘I *am* hungry,’ said Ruby.

‘See?’

Mummy pursed her lips and Ruby felt cross, because faces like that made her remember that she was fat. Not fat like David Leather, whose legs rubbed together so hard that there were threadbare patches on his school trousers, but fat enough to hate a waistband and a mirror. Daddy said it was puppy fat and it was cute, but Ruby knew it wasn’t.

Mummy got up and brought the pan over and draped a little more spaghetti into Ruby’s bowl. She didn’t sit down again; she stood, watching the clock.

‘So,’ said Daddy, glancing at the clock. ‘What’s the occasion?’

‘No occasion,’ said Mummy. ‘Just thought I’d wear them tonight to show Mum what her money bought, that’s all.’

Ruby wound the spaghetti around her fork against the bottom of her bowl. ‘They’re too high, Mummy,’ she said. ‘You’ll fall over on the cobbles.’

‘Break an ankle,’ agreed Daddy.

Mummy stared at her feet and bit her thumbnail. The nail was

already ragged, and when she went to work every day she put a fresh blue plaster on it.

Daddy pushed his chair back from the table and Ruby sucked up her last mouthful of spaghetti, then rushed upstairs after him, to watch him change.



Ruby loved Daddy every day, but on Cowboy Night she loved him even more, with his black clothes and black hat and the fake brass bullets glinting at his waist.

Cowboys was the best game she played in the woods, even though she didn't have a hat or boots or a gunbelt. She had sticks that were shaped like guns, stuck into the pockets of her jeans as if they were in holsters.

Daddy adjusted his black Stetson so that it was low over his eyes, then opened the bottom drawer. Ruby craned to see what was coming out of it, because she wasn't allowed to open the drawer herself. She wasn't allowed to mess with Daddy's cowboy things.

It was the Texas string tie, with a blue stone cattle skull and pointed silver tips to the laces. Daddy stood in front of the pitted mirror that hung on the back of the bedroom door, and looped it over his head, then replaced his hat – making sure it was just right in the mirror.

'Wow!' said Ruby.

He grinned and tipped his brim in her direction.

'Why, thank you, Miss Ruby,' he drawled, making her giggle.

He sat on the bed and pulled on his cowboy boots. Black with fancy white stitching. Mummy had found them in a charity shop, but they fitted like gloves.

'You need spurs,' Ruby said.

'You think so?'

Of course she did; she'd heard *him* say so often enough.

‘Mummy has new shoes,’ she pointed out.

‘Well,’ shrugged Daddy, but didn’t go on.

Her father never said it in so many words, but they both understood that if her mother’s work weren’t so *seasonal* they would all have things that they wanted. In the season she worked almost every night and some days. In the winter she only did weekends, and they ate so much fish that Ruby could smell it on her pillow.

Daddy pulled open the drawer once again and took out the black leather gunbelt. He hitched it loosely, so that the holster hung low on his hip.

‘Can I tie the string?’ said Ruby, kneeling up beside his leg.

The leather thong was difficult to wrestle into a knot and turned into a loose half a bow.

‘Nice tyin’, young ’un.’

Ruby beamed at up him. ‘Sure, JT.’ She tried the accent, but it wound itself around her tongue like a cat and came out in a miaow.

Daddy used to have a gun in his gunbelt. Not a real one, but that didn’t matter – the government had made all the Gunslingers hand in their guns just because one stupid man shot some people miles away. And the man wasn’t even a cowboy, so it was really unfair.

But even without a gun, something about Daddy’s hat and his cowboy voice and his unshaven jaw always excited Ruby in a way she couldn’t put into words. He looked like a film star. Even the pale scars that curved through his eyebrow and across his right cheek looked good on Cowboy Night. In Ruby’s eyes they almost made him better. More *dangerous*.

‘John?’ her mother called up the stairs. ‘It’s quarter past.’

Daddy rolled his eyes at Ruby, and Ruby rolled them back. Nanna and Granpa came at half past. Granpa made her sit on his lap, and Nanna’s idea of sweets was fruit.

‘Can I come with you?’ It burst out of Ruby. She’d learned not to ask often, but she hadn’t asked for *ages*.

Daddy stopped adjusting his belt, and made a face in the mirror that looked like consideration. She held her breath.

‘Not this time, Rubes,’ he said.

‘When?’ she said, emboldened by the pause.

‘When you’re older.’ He always said the same thing.

‘I’m older *now*. I’m getting older all the *time*.’

There was a silent moment when Ruby thought she’d gone too far. But then he turned towards her and grinned.

‘No, you’re not!’ he said, and started to tickle her. ‘You’re not getting older!’

She giggled and rolled. He’d forgotten his cowboy accent, and the only burr in his voice was a West Country one, as he made her suffer with joy.

‘You’re my little cowboy,’ he said as she shrieked. ‘You’ll *always* be my little cowboy.’

‘John? They’ll be here any minute.’

Daddy stopped tickling and sighed, and Ruby flopped on to the bed, wheezing and still giggling on the out-breaths.

‘Big Nose and Ping Pong are on the warpath,’ Daddy whispered, and Ruby laughed. They called them that – just between themselves – because Granpa’s nose *was* big, and Nanna’s eyes were as poppy as ping-pong balls.

He straightened up. ‘I guess I’ll be headin’ out then,’ he said, back in character. ‘You have fun now, y’hear?’

Ruby made a face. ‘*How* old must I be before I can come with you?’

Daddy adjusted his belt for a long time, and when he spoke, it wasn’t in his cowboy voice.

‘Don’t rush to grow up, Rubes,’ he said. ‘There’s nothing good waiting for you there.’

He tilted his hat so it was low over his eyes. Then he got his accent back. ‘You stay home, Miss Ruby. Stay out of trouble.’

At the door, Daddy spun on his heel like a gunslinger, and drew on Ruby.

‘Pow! Pow-pow!’

Instead of a six-shooter he pulled a Mars bar from his holster and lobbed it gently to her. She gasped with delight – then shushed as he raised a secretive finger to his lips.

‘Don’t tell Mummy,’ he said.

Then he tipped his hat to her one last time and jig-jogged down the stairs, whistling ‘Red River Valley’, because it was her favourite song.

Ruby’s smile faded with the tune.

How could Daddy say she shouldn’t rush to grow up? It was all right for *him* to say! He’d probably forgotten what it was even *like* to be little, with all the fatness and the bullies and the homework.

She thought of all the good stuff waiting for her when she got older. The first thing she would do was buy a pony so that when she got a job she could ride it to work and to the shops and hitch it up outside so she could see it from the window. And with the money she made from doing . . . *something* . . . she’d buy her own custard creams and not have to search every time for where Mummy had hidden theirs. She’d live in a warm house in a sunny field, miles from trees, where mould didn’t blacken the walls and where the wind never squealed through the windows.

Daddy must be wrong about growing up.

She couldn’t *wait* to get there.

4

LEGEND HAS IT that in AD 878, Vikings under the leadership of Hubba the Dane landed thirty-three ships right here, at the broad mouth of the River Torridge, and headed up the steep hill to launch an assault on Kenwith Castle. They barely got a mile before they met the English defenders coming the other way. The king's men had the high ground and the raiders were repelled, but not before the battle claimed the lives of thousands of winners and losers alike.

The dead victors were carried back to Kenwith under the first Eagle standard ever captured, while the Danes were buried where they fell – in mass graves dug easily in earth so softened by carnage that it is known to this day as Bloody Corner.

Since then, not much had happened in Appledore.

For nearly twelve hundred years, the little village serried its way up that same hill like a much slower, more respectful invasion. The first row of cottages rose straight from the muddy estuary, and the tide lapped against painted walls and seeped into basements on a twice-daily basis.

Appledore had a post office, three churches and six pubs: the usual ratio. In summer, little galleries and gift shops opened in people's front rooms, selling handmade and home-made gifts, although the hands and homes were mostly Chinese. Not like the Hocking's ice cream, which was made right here in the village from great golden mountains of real butter, and sold from a fleet of vanilla vans.

And not like the ships.

Appledore folk had been building boats for generations, and at its peak Appledore Shipbuilders had employed over two thousand men: so many that one village alone could not satisfy the demand, and men had come from miles around, working shifts around the clock, and riding to the yard on cheap old step-through scooters that cut through sleep like 4am buzz-saws. For half a century the huge iron shed had dominated the river and made bonsais of the trees. Great warships slid from it and into the river, causing passing yachts to bob and pitch like toys. The dry dock had once been the biggest in Europe, and it had seemed that the good times would never end.

But everything ends – especially good times.

And when they ended in Appledore, fifteen hundred men lost their jobs.

Overnight.

Fifteen hundred breadwinners. Fifteen hundred skilled welders and fitters and carpenters and machinists, suddenly unemployed in a place where the job centre only regularly offered bar work, labouring and babysitting.

Many of the men never worked again. Not legally, anyway. They missed the work and the money, of course, but more than that, they missed their mates and the way men could be when they were with other men – which was not the same way they had to be when they were with women.

So they found other places to meet. Some of them met in the bookmaker's, some in the pubs, some in the snooker halls.

And some of them joined the Gunslingers.

The Gunslingers were a loose group of maybe twenty men who, once a week, dressed up as cowboys and met at the George in Appledore – just as the Shootists did at the Bell in Parkham and the Outlaws did at the Coach and Horses in Barnstaple.

North Devon had its fair share of cowboys, that was for sure. All

week they worked in banks or did odd jobs, but Cowboy Nights transported them for just a few hours to the Wild West, where men were men, women were buxom, and jails were made of wood.

When the Gunslingers had first appeared, the residents of Appledore had been a little nervous of the men in boots and black hats who swaggered down the narrow canyon of Irsha Street every Friday night. But after a while the net curtains stopped twitching every time a cowpoke passed through the little fishing village on his way to the pub, and it was left only to small gangs of teenaged boys to laugh and shout insults.

From a safe distance.

Once at the George, the Gunslingers got drunk and showed off and flirted with the barmaids, and talked in a cowboy way about cowboy things.

Like fashion.

They fell on any new item of cowboy clothing or equipment like Beverly Hills housewives – poring over it for style and authenticity. Funds and geography dictated that items usually failed on both counts. Nellie Wilson's holster was from army surplus, Scratch Mumford's poncho had been crocheted by his mother, and Blacky Blackmore's cowboy hat had a Pixar logo under the brim.

The Gunslingers' most authentic asset came when Frank 'Whippy' Hocking would ride his hairy skewbald, Tonto, through the village and tie him up outside the George. There, tourists took pictures, and small children fed him sugar and ketchup and any other pub condiments that were free. 'No mustard,' Whippy always told them. When he left, the worse for wear, the other Gunslingers would come outside and help to push Whippy up into the tooled leather saddle. It always took at least three of them to heave him upright, because Whippy was one of the ice-cream clan, and quality control was his life.

When they weren't peacocking, the Gunslingers played a casual game of poker for pennies and bickered back and forth about old

TV Westerns – wavering between *Bonanza* and *The High Chaparral* and *The Virginian*. Between them they had pirated all the box sets. In the films they were split between Clint Eastwood or Gary Cooper; John Wayne or Jimmy Stewart. Their jury was always out on Kevin Costner, who promised so much and so often – then somehow always managed to ruin things with gills or a bad haircut.

If a man joined the Gunslingers – and if he were not thoroughly unpopular – he'd be given a cowboy name. Whether he liked it or not. Mostly these names were bestowed for low reasons that barely troubled the imagination. Blacky Blackmore delivered coal, Hick Trick lived in the sticks, while Daisy Yeo moored loudly and randomly, in a sort of agricultural Tourette's; in the supermarket you could hear him aisles away.

Some men tried to join up with their cowboy name all ready to go, but the Gunslingers had no truck with that. Indeed, they were apt to punish such presumption, which was why Len 'Pussy' Willows' membership had been short and fractious, ending in a brawl that had memorably spilled out of the George and all the way down Irsha Street.

Just like real cowboys.

It had happened six months ago, and they still worked it into at least one conversation a week.

As the night and the beer ran down, the Gunslingers would get reflective on how much better life would be if only North Devon were open of range and filled with cattle – preferably ones which needed driving from one end of the county to the other on a regular basis. They'd put Willie and Johnny on the jukebox in a mournful loop, and sigh into their empty glasses and empty holsters, and long for the good old days before varmints started shooting small children and everyone got so damned jumpy – even about replicas.