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**A Novel
by
William Bowles**

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With a nod to Steve Jones who, in part, inspired this story

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter 21

The less you eat, drink, buy books, go to the theater, go dancing, go drinking, think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you *save* and the greater will become that treasure which neither moths nor maggots can consume -- your *capital*. The less you *are*, the less you give expression to your life, the more you *have*, the greater is your *alienated* life ... So all passions and all activity are submerged in *greed* – Karl Marx, notebooks, 1844

It's been really difficult for me to write about the events that transpired through the Long Summer, not only because in virtually every way it made what I'd already been through seem so trivial (I kid you not) but in trying to set it down, no matter how I have tried to describe it, it always ends up reading like a cheap and utterly unbelievable end of the world as we know it movie even though I have tried faithfully to impart the essence of the times as we experienced them. No, let me rephrase that; it was more like a 1950s Ealing comedy. If I give you a blow-by-blow account, it'll be boring, so you'll have to forgive the many omissions and what might appear to be the trivialising of the upheavals that took place. Take it on faith that the breakdown occurred as what can best be described as an utterly 'English' affair, that is, bumbling and half-arsed with none of the drama one associates with the end of civilisation as we knew it and frankly, by the time it was all over, we were a lot better off, and so was the rest of the planet. And I don't miss one little bit of what we had before. To be fair, from the descriptions we got from those who escaped the cities, they would probably give you an entirely different account of events but then I can only describe the Long Summer the way it was for me and for those closest to me.

But first I should tell you that we are still in Oban, living in the cottage and outwardly at least, things seem completely normal except for the weather. The town is bustling with life albeit on foot, bicycle, even horse and cart but no cars. We even have electricity thanks to the ingenuity of the many hundreds of people who managed to make it this far north, bringing with them the knowledge and skills of what had been an advanced, technological society, so it's not exactly been a reversion to William Morris's 'News From Nowhere', all fair maidens and hand looms. On the other hand, I can safely say that the Corporate State is dead and gone without a chance of ever returning and who is to say what the future holds as Gaia rules okay.

And as far as I can tell, in an ironic turn of events, the ‘developing’ countries are actually far better off now than before would you believe, but it makes sense when you consider that not only didn’t they have as ‘far to fall’ as we did, without the crippling burden of debt, they could at least take charge of their own destinies. Not that the ‘fall’ was without the pain of withdrawal symptoms but certainly it was no worse than the destruction we had delivered in the name of democracy and other bastardised words.

July – It’s summer again, not that you’d know we’d even had a winter, with only the barest hint of spring let alone the traditional Scottish winter of snow and gales even here on the West coast, warmed by the kiss of the Gulf Stream.

The change of climate is so extreme and so sudden as to have brought the rural economy to a state of virtual collapse. Farmers who tried to stick with the methods they have used for generations found that some of the Winter plantings failed to germinate or did and then withered and died. And not only that, insects, birds, trees were either disappearing or just dying off. The entire ecology is, if not on the verge of collapse, then undergoing a total transformation which we may or may not live through. Further south it was even worse with the wholesale failure of crops, farms going bankrupt and it is rumoured that the government is on the verge of declaring a state of emergency and introducing rationing. The situation is made all the more bizarre by the glorious weather with short, warm evening rains that are more like those of the tropics, cooling down things a little, making the evenings the perfect time to take a stroll along the empty beaches now devoid of tourists.

But food – or the lack of it – is becoming a serious concern. Deliveries to the shops and supermarkets have either stopped or became a trickle. Had the local farmers crops to sell it would have actually meant a boom for them. A handful of the more farsighted farmers have seen it coming and like the girls, altered their crops to suit the new climate but nowhere near enough to meet demand and it was obvious that a lot of hoarding was going on. The town council called a meeting and proposed the establishment of cooperative gardens for the town and asked that anybody with the knowledge and skill to volunteer their time. We volunteered of course, with the girls causing quite a stir but people were so desperate that even the sight of two small girls and their ‘changeling’ mothers volunteering was gladly accepted after we explained what we had been doing. The amazing thing was the total lack of panic, more an air of resignation really. The local fishermen could possibly supply enough for everyone, locally

– if they had fuel for the boats but not only had fuel supplies dried up but there was an even bigger problem, that of the collapse of the money economy as there was virtually nothing to buy, at least nothing of use. In the space of a couple of months we regressed to a barter economy except that most had very little to barter with. Things looked bad. When groups of roving ‘refugees’ started turning up there were some very ugly scenes.

August – Then the army turned up ostensibly we were informed to ‘maintain order’ but armed with regulations from the days of ‘Terror’, they took over all the local government structures. There were confrontations between the locals and the army when all the remaining food supplies were requisitioned and a curfew declared following clashes between the locals and the army. Public meetings and gatherings of more than five people outlawed. Strangely, the military didn’t even bother to find out if people were growing their own food and it was obvious that they had no idea of what to do. Did they intend to just let people starve?

Things got really tense for a while, with confrontations between the locals and the refugees that the army seemed strangely reluctant to interfere in, preferring instead to push the locals around who complained about how they had ‘hijacked’ the town’s resources. The skirmishes continued for a couple of weeks but then strangely petered out. The news, if that’s what it can be called, via the BBC was predictably bland and reassuring about the situation. You’ve heard it all before, about how the situation was under control and steps were being taken and that food supplies were not threatened, and that the breaks in power supply were ‘only temporary’ but then they always are aren’t they.

Then one day we woke up to find that the army had departed. No explanations, not even to the local council. No doubt their ‘services’ were required elsewhere. We were, it seemed, on our own.

Does this make the ‘transition’ sound all too easy? I call it the transition because in the fullness of time that’s exactly what happened. Things didn’t exactly collapse, I suppose the best way to describe it is that centre ‘lost touch with the periphery’, that is, anything and anybody outside of the major urban centres just got forgotten about. Maybe they thought we’d just fade away without any fuss. After all, over 80 per cent of the population lived in cities. So it wasn’t exactly a revolution in the classical sense of the word. Much later, I mean nearly a year later, we found out that things had been pretty bad for awhile with insurrections and what not but it was obvious that with the situation being global in scope, given Britain’s

dependence on trade and most of its wealth coming from financial transactions and ripping of the developing world, once that ended, there was no place left to turn to except inward. Eventually, new trade deals were struck, especially with the oil producing nations and eventually even the poor countries were in a position to strike good deals over food exports to the formerly developed world. I mean what were the alternatives, invade eighty per cent of the planet?

Then one morning there was a knock at the door. A petite young woman wearing a blue business suit, hot and out of breath, stood on the doorstep holding a clipboard. She smiled nervously before announcing herself in her lilting Scottish accent.

‘Good morning to you, my name is Jeannine McTavish and I’m from the town council. Do you have some time to spare?’

‘Yes, would you like to come in?’

‘Thank you.’

She followed me into the kitchen where the girls were preparing a lunch of our store-bought rice and vegetables from the garden. She beamed at the girls who smiled politely back.

‘Please, sit down. Would you like some tea?’

She nodded, looking rather nervous. I put the kettle on and got some mugs down from the shelf.

‘Thank you, that’s very kind of you. I’ll not waste your time, what we are trying to do is assess how we can all contribute to our collective survival, so toward that end we are compiling a list of all the skills and resources within the area covered by the council. Obviously all the rules have changed so we need to develop an entirely new model if we are to survive.’

‘That’s very enlightened,’ I said with more than a hint of sarcasm than I really hadn’t intended. She blushed and gave me an understanding look but said nothing. Perhaps we could survive the upheaval after all?

She looked so longingly at the food the girls were preparing I was tempted to ask her if she wanted to join us for lunch.

‘Valentina, please fetch Judy.’

‘Yes Mama.’

‘Would you care to join us?’ I gestured toward the food.

‘Are you sure, I don’t want to...?’

‘Of course.’

Judy came into the kitchen and I introduced Jeannine.

‘Jeannine is from the council.’

We sat down and the girls dished up lunch. For a while nothing was said. Then Jeannine complimented me on the food.

‘Oh I didn’t cook it, the girls did.’

‘Oh,’ she said, surprised, ‘Well it’s delicious.’

‘Thank you,’ said the girls in unison, looking quite proud of themselves. We rarely if ever entertained guests.

‘Well,’ said Jeannine, ‘Down to business. We noted,’ referring to her clipboard, ‘that before the army so rudely interrupted, you volunteered your services?’

‘Yes we did and we still do.’

The girls nodded vigorously.

‘What do you have in mind?’

‘We’re trying to assess whether or not we can become self-sufficient in food production and energy.’

‘Well we, that is the girls, have a fairly modest market garden going. Modest because we don’t have an awful lot of space.’

‘Mama, why don’t we show Jeannine?’

So we all trooped out into the back yard and the girls, anxious to show off their skills gave Jeannine a guided tour of the allotment. Jeannine was clearly impressed and asked if she could measure the area under cultivation and make a record of the kinds of crops we were growing.

‘Very impressive,’ she said as she inspected the small garden making notes on her clipboard. ‘But with this area under cultivation, you can’t produce a surplus.’

‘Well no, but then we never intended to. If we had more space we’d grow more.’

‘Well that’s what we calculate. But we also have to produce some kind of plan. The major problem is a shortage of skills. Most of the people in Oban catered to the tourist trade, hotels, restaurants, gift shops and so forth. We’re looking at establishing some kind of a LETS system but the problem is that there’s not much call for restaurants let alone hotels, although...’

‘Although what?’ Judy asked.

‘Well I assume you’ve noticed that there’s been a large influx of people into the area, refugees I suppose we should call them. If we don’t do something about it, we’ve got a real crisis on our hands. We’re simply not equipped to deal with them. So it’s been proposed that in exchange for their labour, we give them places to live.’

‘Farm labour you mean?’

‘Well yes but many also have technical skills. We need to develop a sustainable energy supply, and there’s the issue of education, maintenance and development of the town’s infrastructure. Believe it or not there’s even talk of restarting the tourist trade. One proposal is to supply food to the restaurants. And we need to re-engineer the fishing boats.’

And so it went.

‘So you’ve been having this conversation with quite a lot of people then?’

‘Well yes and the response has been really amazing given the circumstances but then people are desperate.’

‘Have you been to the estate?’

‘You mean,’ she looked embarrassed, ‘Where you, I mean...’

‘Where we moved from?’

‘Well yes we have. I didn’t go, one of my associates did and it seems that they’re pursuing the same route you are. Have you been there recently?’

‘No we haven’t.’

‘Well, they went through some pretty bad times, invasions, arguments, falling outs, I suppose you’d have to call them palace revolutions and counter-revolutions but you should talk to Shaun my associate, he knows more about it than I do.’

She looked at her watch.

‘Look, I have to go but as soon as we complete the survey we want to convene a town meeting and come up with, well a new constitution really although the councillors are calling it just a change in the bye-laws but then you know what local councillors are like. Since the army left, we’ve had very little communication with central government, so we’re assuming we’re on our own and acting accordingly. But if I could, I’d like to talk again? But I really have to go, I’m running awfully late.’

‘So what’s your official position?’ I asked as we walked her to the door.

‘Well I’m the town planning officer, well at least I am now.’

With that, we saw her to the door, watched her get onto a bicycle and pedal up the lane, waving to us without looking round as she pedalled furiously up the hill.

The following day we had another visitor, well actually visitors, from the estate. It turned out to be more of a delegation really and a sorry bunch they were. There were eight of them, four

mothers and their daughters and they looked pitifully thin and haggard. I was gob-smacked. One of them was the woman I'd befriended during our stay on the estate, Sarah and her daughter Venus. We ushered them into the kitchen and crammed around the table. I'd been meaning to pay the estate a visit for awhile but well as you can imagine other events intervened.

Valentina and Rebecca were close to tears when they saw the state Venus was in as well as the other girls, and immediately started preparing food, pushing us out of the way as they bustled around the kitchen, going out into the garden to get veggies and getting more and more angry as they talked to the girls and found out what had been going on.

'But you're all so thin, my God! I can't believe this all happened.'

'Well I think we're over the worst' said Sarah. 'We thought about getting in touch with you but what could you have done?'

'We were just talking about coming to see you. We had a visit from the council.'

'Yes, a man came to see us as well, that's why we decided to come and see you and also, well things have settled down somewhat now. We've been so out of touch with things and the girls missed Valentina and Rebecca so much. God so much has happened.'

We spent the entire afternoon catching up with events and getting angry as well, especially with that fool Maxine and her 'revolutionary' politics'. It seems that instead of utilising the skills of the girls in getting food production underway, after all they had the space and the resources, she'd ignored all the warnings until it was too late and the estate got invaded by all and sundry, creating total chaos and a lot of destruction! It was only after a long and bitter struggle that they'd managed to get most of the invaders to leave. The wonder of it was that nobody had actually been killed. In the meantime, the stocks of food ran out (or were looted) and it was only recently that a group, headed by Sarah, had got it together to start planting.

'So now what?' asked Judy.

'Well, the first thing is to get us self-sufficient. As you can see, it's been tough, really tough, especially for girls. I hear you got taken over by the army?'

'Yes but it didn't last long, they just upped and left without even saying goodbye. Actually, things are looking quite positive but it all depends on what the weather's going to do, at least that seems to be the general consensus. If it settles down enough for us to plan ahead then at least we won't starve but who knows.'

'Planning ahead could well be impossible as there's still the question of rising sea levels that could alter everything, especially here.'

Everybody looked at Judy, who'd said very little up until then.

'Don't you all look at me like that! Haven't you noticed?'

'Noticed what?'

'The coastline and the estuary for that matter. The water level is rising. Nova, I can't believe you didn't notice as you walked along the beach how narrow it is now.'

'Well no I didn't. Are you sure? Nobody else has said anything.'

'Well like you, nobody else is looking.'

'Well if it is, there's nothing we can do about it and in any case, what's the rate of rise? How much time do we have before it's lapping at the front door? Are you suggesting we should move? Selling the house is out of the question. Where would we move to?' God, it doesn't bear thinking about...'

'All I'm saying is that we've known for ages that the level is rising we just don't know by how much.'

'And we still don't and the government aren't going to tell us, if they know that is.'

'Well no that's true but all I'm saying is we should think about it.'

'Why don't you come back to the estate,' suggested Sarah.

'Judy, you may well be right about the sea level but frankly don't we have enough to deal with already? Don't you think we should deal with our immediate and near term problems first?'

'Yes, perhaps you're right.'

We sat around the kitchen not really saying much. Eventually Judy fled to her study and the girls fled to the garden, away from five extremely depressed women, drawn together by a common sense of vulnerability and fear for their children. For the first time in ages, I could have smoked a big, fat spliff and vanished from the world we had created.