

PREFACE

I am Derek Gainsborough and I always have been. Past the point I thought of changing my name and through the times when I thought that my name had abandoned me, we have stuck together until perhaps nothing separates us.

That probably means very little to you and why should it? You have your own name and whatever separations might come with that.

But this is my name, my story and my own regard for telling it. If one has a creed to one's name, an unknown apparatus that adheres us to it, I will hope to have as much of an understanding by the end of this story as yourself. But how best to do that, and where best to draw a mark and begin from?

I do not wish to wander into a list of places and people as a way to present my life, but I shall assure you from the very beginning that I was not born at sea and, unlike others, I have never pretended to be. The brine in these veins came quickly to me, however, as I was born at my parents' home on Dividend Street in Bradfield, Essex. This placed the beautiful River Stour right there in front of my toes. From a younger age than I can remember, I would walk tracks alongside the river with my mother, swaddled in tall grasses and curious for everything: fast-passing boats that cut blades through the water, iridescent flying insects too busy to be caught and the sun, beating down somewhere between aid and anger.

From what I can scramble to remember, and what has been added to by the memory of others, I am heartened to think that I spent my first handful of years in something like perpetual summer, a warm glow as regular as cow parsley. Perhaps that was just how things were for everyone in the late 1920s. I can't say that I remember.

So where to begin?

My birthdate? Let's settle at April 2, 1929, and leave it at that.

The early years of my schooling are best and easily forgotten as I exercised my ability to abstain from such a thing, so we really can't begin there either. I received an education like a lot of us back then inasmuch as I lived close to a farm. And next to the farm was a blacksmith. Between the furrow and the furnace, I learnt a great deal . . . although it was the

blacksmith who taught me how to swear properly – how to mean the word. He was quiet but fierce, like my father but easier to love because he wasn't. A short man, his name is forgotten to me, although I can snatch at the finer details of his glazed and pitted face in my memory. He was tougher than pig iron but all the locals were then. The farmer I worked with had to go back to pulling with horses when his ramshackle steam tractor collapsed on him one late winter. But armed with two horses, the field was never turned so fast.

You weren't just young when you were ten years old around those types – you were small.

And scruffy, I remember being that. The brown in my hair has always been more filth than follicle, as hungry for a wash as I always was for feeding back in those days. Famished. You don't hear that word around as much now, and nor should you, but me and my mates were perpetually famished.

That's when I learned how to fish and that is where I think we shall begin: the River Stour, likely 1938. Then I can tell you something of my parents.

ONE

A Mother's Bream

Like so many places in nature, rivers are fun to play in, but they can only become known by hunting, through the careful grasping for plunder. And the River Stour had plunder: pike, bream and roach to begin with, and plenty else for afters. My mother, Connie Noakes, knew a widow who lived further up the river at the end of . . . Stone Lane, I think. Yes, that was her lane. She had lost her husband in the First World War and I would walk to her house often with my mother. Sometimes my father, Clive, would come with us, and those days must have been Sundays because you couldn't force my father into anything on the other days of the week if he didn't want to do it. Anyway, on those Sundays that he came with us, he began to teach me how to fish off the end of the dear widow's jetty.

It was a busy place to learn, but then the River Stour was always a busy place. Local records at Manningtree had put the number of moored or passing vessels there at being over five hundred strong by 1900. There was always something steaming past or coming into view, manned with ever-busy souls, either eager to dock and taste dry land or to head back to sea having already seen enough of what land had to offer. At ten years of age, I could see that these shifting, ceaseless crews were privy to something that the rest of us were not. Either that or they were close to finding it, and whatever it was would be on the next haul.

'Concentrate, lad,' my dad would tell me as my mind wandered away from the fishing. 'Fish are canny, Derek. Outsmart them but be patient about it.'

I would straighten my posture and hold the rod with greater apparent focus than I had actually managed and continue patiently fishing while he watched, his presence keen even as his own focus wandered about the river. He wasn't a tall man, my father, and what there was of him was mostly skin and bone. But it had been enough to carry him this far.

He'd been a communications runner in the trenches during The Great War, running out into the fray in order to trace and repair telephone lines. Mum had told me once that he

had run across most of northern France and even into the trenches over the border in Belgium. I thought that perhaps he was just trying to reach the end of them. I know that I would have.

He was fast, people had said, right up to the point that he was shot in the leg. He returned home then to recover and went back to working at the same farm that he had worked at before the whole incident. He wouldn't run again but, as some measure of payment, the farm had also taken on the employ of a young woman from the outskirts of our neighbouring village, Bradfield. That was my mum, Connie Bridge, and she loved it when my father and I brought her back fresh bream from the river.

Like most things that I have turned my hand to, fishing required a unique understanding of its physics. The deft flicks and gestures of my father's technique came not through force but something else – a wider understanding of the environment and his place stood at the centre of it. I tried copying him and would listen with intent to instructions, but in the end I think it was blind luck that landed that first bream onto my hook. I reeled it in before luck changed its mind, let my Dad beat it to death with one swipe against the jetty and I ran towards the windows of the house in a pre-pubescent frenzy of shrieking. Over the coming weeks, my excitement at catching bream levelled, but not my mother's appreciation for receiving them. One day I brought home some pike as well. I was pretty much hooked on fishing from then onwards – right up to the point that I had to start using a wheelchair for some great amount of time, but we'll get to that at a later point I'm sure.

Now where were we? Pike . . . damn bony stuff. I seemed willing to learn the patience for catching them but bore none at all for the boning afterwards. My mum was patient, though, as she was with all things. She would cook them off as steaks and I would head away again, probably stopping at my mate Nigel's house to see if he was in before heading to catch some more.

Perhaps Nigel had only come once or twice, but it seems important to my recollections that I would try to rustle him when I went out. Now that I come to think about it, my strongest memories of Nigel were from potato season, but you'd always be running into everyone around potato time. Mum worked the fields then too, and my dad would be up the next farm but one and doing much the same. Then long evenings of quiet as my parents relaxed and stretched out their aches. Nothing seemed complicated back in that time; the rules of the game seemed easy and required no more effort than I was willing to give.

Soon, though, I would have a baby sister, and everyone else would have another world war. Busy times for everyone, and before those things happened, Father took the ownership of an old wooden row boat with a small stove bolted to its base.

A little way downriver, the Stour featured various inlets not navigated by steamers but more than enough at high tide for Dad and I to row the boat along and catch fish together, finally both with our own rods. The boat was fantastical, bespoke in the sense that so few others would attempt such a thing. It is a pride that I have long chased. The boat was old enough to have been through several owners before it fell into Dad's hands, and the central stove was obviously not part of the original plan. But it worked, very well in my few memories of biting winter afternoons, and only as long as you respected its perimeter of heat, which was considerable when two people were on board.

I would like to remember what we might have talked about out there, but they would be guesses based on what I might ask him now. I think once I might have asked him if it was true that he used to pull a single plough with his father working the blade when he was young. I can't think of what he might have said, but I had already been told that it was true, and that would have been enough at ten years of age. Then by the age of eleven I was allowed to take the boat out on my own.

My first steerage, and the first to go down.