



WE WERE
WOLVES

Written and illustrated by
JASON COCKCROFT



ANDERSEN PRESS

First published in 2021 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise,
without the written permission of the publisher.

The right of Jason Cockcroft to be identified as the author and illustrator
of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Copyright © Jason Cockcroft, 2021

Epigraph from *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck, published by Penguin Classics.
East of Eden copyright © John Steinbeck, 1952
Published by Viking Press 1952, William Heinemann Ltd 1952, Penguin Books 1992,
2000, 2017.

Reproduced with kind permission of Penguin Books Ltd.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 83913 057 1

Printed and bound in Italy by Elcograf S.p.A.



*This book is dedicated to
Alan Cockcroft,
my father.*





There is no other story.

A man, after he has brushed off the dust
and chips of life, will have left only the hard,
clean questions: was it good or was it evil?

East of Eden, John Steinbeck



SO WHAT DO you want to know?

I suppose you're expecting to hear about how I killed my dad and got away with it, and how when they found me I was nearly half dead myself, on account that he'd tried to do away with me. Except that's not what happened, of course. Not that anyone cares now. Because lies have faster legs than the truth, like Mam says. So all I can do is tell it like it happened and as I saw it, because it's our story, me and John. And now he's gone for good, so who else will tell the tale if not me?



PART ONE





ONE

IT BEGAN WITH the dog.

John always said that it was a bad idea to get too close to anything that needed you, and I suppose when the dog arrived I had a choice, and I chose wrong, that's all. I should have listened to John, but he was in prison by then, and I was alone and needed something that was just mine for once.

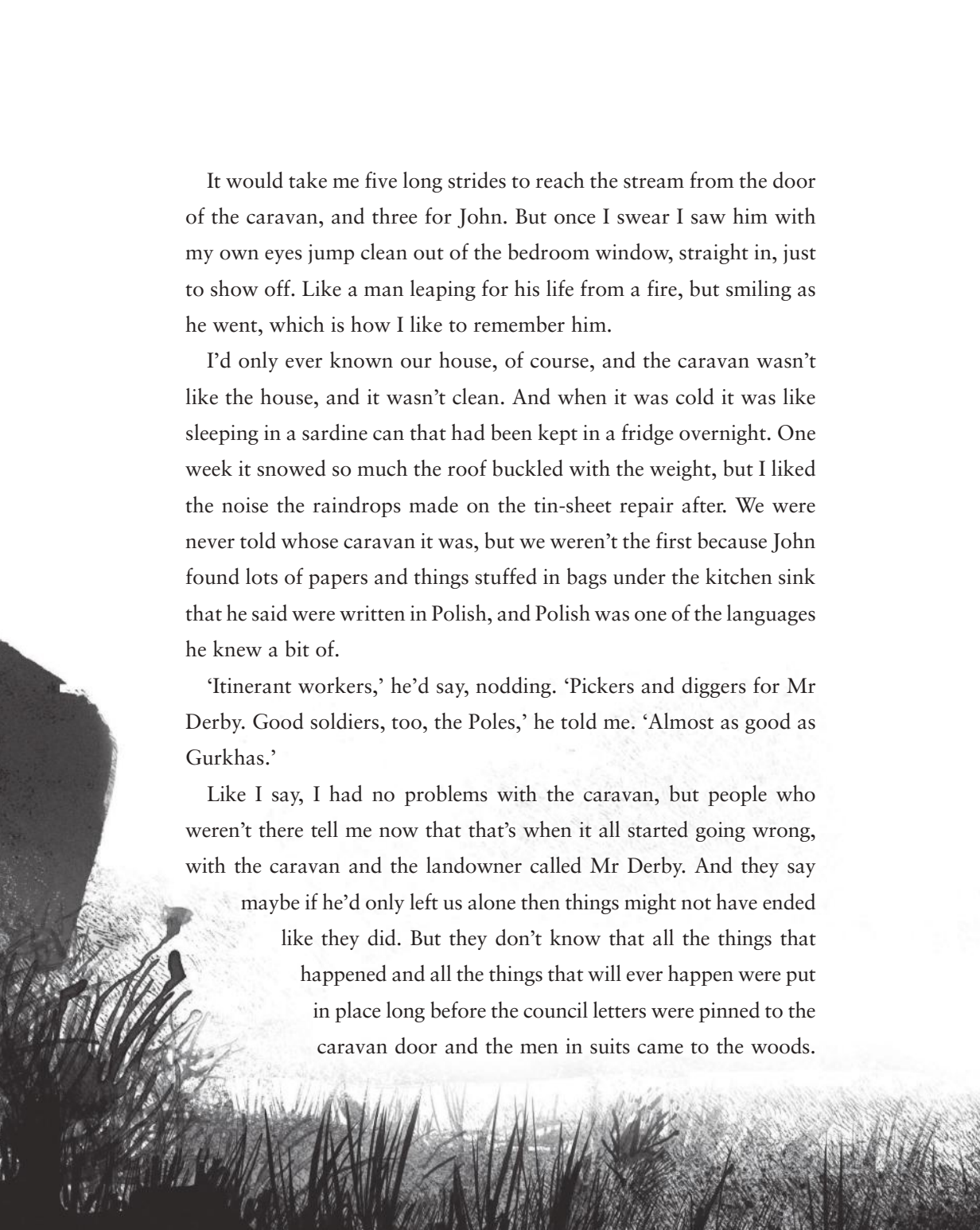
John was my dad's name. He never liked me calling him Dad and didn't call me son, not even when I was young and he was away in the desert making sure we were all safe, and we'd only get to talk on the phone once or twice a month. Him and Mam weren't together then, but they hadn't told anyone and certainly not me. People didn't know until he came home and started living in the woods instead of in our house. Which is when Mam started to worry. At first, he just had a sleeping bag and the few tools he needed, and it could have been a hobby, a bit of fun. But later there was the caravan, and later still, I moved in with him, and it wasn't fun any more.

I liked the caravan. In winter it smelled of mould and peat and oil from the heater, and in summer it smelled of sunlight and hot glass and wild garlic. We were next to the stream and after March the garlic choked the banks with white flowers so that the air was thick with it,

sweet and heavy like nothing I'd smelled before. I didn't know anything about garlic or burdock before I lived with him, couldn't point to a nettle, even. What I knew was streetlights and pavements and locked doors and no plants and no trees. There wasn't any green on the estate. But in the woods, you learned quick, for no better reason than you had to. Sometimes it felt like a different world, away from the real things that happened, which is what John wanted, I think.

The caravan was small. It didn't have carpet or furniture, but it had a narrow room with a bed in it and a fold-out cot in the front part, a stand-up kitchen but no electricity, a toilet but no plumbing. We did our business in the woods, and took water from the stream.





It would take me five long strides to reach the stream from the door of the caravan, and three for John. But once I swear I saw him with my own eyes jump clean out of the bedroom window, straight in, just to show off. Like a man leaping for his life from a fire, but smiling as he went, which is how I like to remember him.

I'd only ever known our house, of course, and the caravan wasn't like the house, and it wasn't clean. And when it was cold it was like sleeping in a sardine can that had been kept in a fridge overnight. One week it snowed so much the roof buckled with the weight, but I liked the noise the raindrops made on the tin-sheet repair after. We were never told whose caravan it was, but we weren't the first because John found lots of papers and things stuffed in bags under the kitchen sink that he said were written in Polish, and Polish was one of the languages he knew a bit of.

'Itinerant workers,' he'd say, nodding. 'Pickers and diggers for Mr Derby. Good soldiers, too, the Poles,' he told me. 'Almost as good as Gurkhas.'

Like I say, I had no problems with the caravan, but people who weren't there tell me now that that's when it all started going wrong, with the caravan and the landowner called Mr Derby. And they say maybe if he'd only left us alone then things might not have ended like they did. But they don't know that all the things that happened and all the things that will ever happen were put in place long before the council letters were pinned to the caravan door and the men in suits came to the woods.

What happened was set out before I was born even, and before John and my mam met, and before the war, too. Before the beasts that had laid quiet under that wood for thousands of years finally climbed up out of the soil. It was all set like a sleeping stone in the earth beneath our feet long before any of us were here, like the bones of bears and wolves and wild bulls that are there if you dig deep enough.

‘Things happen despite us, not because of us,’ is what John would say, ‘and it’s pointless fighting it. There are better fights to be had,’ he’d tell me, squeezing my hand and looking at me, real warm, like he thought just seeing his smile would let me know what he meant. Which it didn’t, not always.

He’d been arrested for burglary, but pleaded trespass, which meant he was banged up anyway, on account of his record. That was the story, but John always said, ‘If the coppers want to, they could have you locked up for as long as they want, and that’s why you have to make sure you always have someone on your side with clout.’ Clout meaning power, meaning money, meaning back-up.

John knew villains, see. Men with flash cars who’d come and park up on the other side of the stream, and them and John would do business while I walked through the trees and tried not to listen too hard in case I heard something I didn’t like.

Some of them he got on with and some he didn’t, but he always told me, ‘Never turn down a chat with a bloke about a job, because you don’t know if it’ll bring you Gold and Stars.’ Gold and Stars were always big with him, cluttering his head, like they were real rather

than just ideas – because of the things he'd heard out in that desert, I suppose, and the things he'd seen. Men turned to red dust in a gunflash, and flames that spewed up from the black sand, straight like fountains. Up to the sky, black and orange and burning.

But I knew the difference.

When they took him down in the court in Leeds, he shouted over to me that he'd be gone no more than a month. So I nodded, and I walked to the bus station with the rucksack the lawyer man had given me on the street, and I got the bus back to our place in the woods, and I never thought to doubt what he said, because John was always right when it came to the coppers and the courts. And it wasn't the first time he'd been banged up, anyway, was it? On account of the other time, back before the caravan and the woods, back when I still thought we'd be a family. Me, him and Mam. So I wasn't too worried, see. I never looked in the rucksack, either, because I knew I'd find the gun there. And I didn't want anything to do with that, because guns meant Pain and Blood and Death, and as far as I was concerned John had seen enough of that already for both of us. But there are some things you can't avoid, no matter how hard you try, and I suppose men of guns always end in a bad way, and that's how it was for him, only I didn't know that then.



TWO

SOMETIMES, IN SUMMER, there'd be other people in the fields close by. Families playing games by their tents, cooking at night and music coming through the trees. That's where I met Sophie, but I'll talk about her later, because she didn't know anything about the dog coming, not until after it all started going bad. And I loved her, and maybe she loved me, but that's all I'll say for now.

I'd been living with John for half a year, so I already knew how to cook over the camping stove, and how not to waste the paraffin, and how to cover our tracks and stop too much smoke from rising, and find fresh food when I needed it. I could tell sorrel from lords and ladies, and hemlock from cow parsley, and I could name off the top of my head seven different mushrooms for eating.

When John was sent down it was early March, and a real nice one – mists in the first hours but the kind that burned off quick as soon as the sun came out. Most mornings back then I'd drink tea by the small pile of stones I'd press round the fire, for the heat they'd give off, and I'd wonder what we'd do when he came out of Armley Gaol and if things would be different.



Gaol meaning prison, meaning clink, meaning lock-up.

I wondered whether we'd stay in the caravan or if he had new plans – plans that would make me worried and excited at the same time. And I thought other thoughts, like how we all came to be, and how it is that men and women meet and decide to bring a kid into the world, and the magic in all that, and the recklessness, too. I thought about what it meant that some things live only as long as a day, mayflies and the like, and others survive a hundred years or more. And I thought about how when you're on your own, time sort of slows, but not in a bad way, and it gives you space to hear things clearly, birds and that.

Birds were on my mind. Before getting the bus back from Leeds, I'd gone to the big library and got a book out about birdsong and their eggs and nests, and what to look for, and by the time he came back I wanted to be able to show him I recognised nuthatch and different kinds of woodpecker. So I sat and drank the hot tea as the dew glistened on my boots and the glossy blue air filled with cobwebs, and I thought about waking next to him, and his smell, and the great bellows he made going outside to set the fire for breakfast, to clear out his chest, yelling like a muntjac deer.

While I was thinking about all this on that first afternoon alone, the dog appeared, all yellow and still, like the ground itself had spat her out, like she'd been under the earth in the roots and dirt and stones, asleep all this time and content, and only waiting for the right time to show herself to me.

Which I think, looking back, was the truth.

She was a yellow dog with short fur and a black nose and eyes that had a silvery shine when you looked close. They stared back at you and past you at the same time, which I didn't mind at all.



‘Here, girl.’

She looked at me and past me, and turned.

‘Come on, don’t be shy.’

There was a long, narrow clearing by the caravan where we’d strip the nettles right down, John and me. Low enough so the new growth was clean and tender, instead of woody. New leaves made the best nettle tea, John said. Anyway, the dog wandered down the outside of the nettle paddock, nosed me, curious and sort of sleepy-eyed, as though having woken from a long dream. Then, seeing that I was no threat, she went back up the trail on the opposite side, through the died-back sorrel and chervil, before doing it all over again. Each time she made her round and lifted her head to look at me, it was as though she was seeing me for the first time. Gentle and helpless, and trusting.

After an hour, the dog lay down near the fire and I went over to see if she had a collar.

A small brassy disc had the name ‘Molly’ engraved on it.

I went to the van and got a coil of blue baling twine and tied it around the dog’s neck, and tried training her to sit. But she hated the twine and shook her head so hard, trying to get it loose, that I was worried she’d hurt herself. So I gave up on tying her, and after that I never did use the twine again. Anyway, she already knew how to sit.

