



# A night in the meadow

Owning a Somerset meadow with a huge variety of wild flowers and grasses is one thing, but sleeping out there is quite another – as Polly Devlin and Andy Garnett discover in this episode from their lyrical new book, *A Year in the Life of an English Meadow*. Illustration by Tony Sigley



PICTURE THIS. IT IS A LATE SUMMER EVENING IN THE GLOAMING, the curlew is calling and the hedges are dense, smelling, lit by the glow of woodbine. Our meadow lies silent: the flying life that turns it into the Heathrow of the insect world has gone to rest. From the woods that surround the fields come the purrings and whirrings of the nightjar. All is still. Down the lane, between the hedges, come two lunatics, trailing a motley selection of things.

They are carrying spindly, steel chaises longues, the uncomfortable ones, the ones that close up like a mousetrap when you lower yourself on to them, or snap and break your fingers. From about their persons drip blankets and sleeping bags and pillows. The man is making muffled whining noises in his head which the woman can hear by divination, and sometimes the noises break through the sound barrier and become audible as a resigned low grizzle; she is silent save for the odd snorting noise which anyone who has ever tried to suppress laughter (say, in church) would recognise as

stifled giggles, verging on the hysterical. Following the pair are five dogs, completely agog about what is going on, barking and yelping fit to bust, grabbing each other and fighting a bit, and between times rolling excitedly on badger droppings, so that a smell rises from them that is pale and livid. The sheep on the other side of the hedges stir and rise as the procession passes onwards.

This odd pair turn into the meadow, to its beautiful middle where the flowers jostle each other, and begin to pitch camp. Or rather I, the woman, me – yes, it's me, and my husband – begin to try to put up the camping beds, which of course collapse and crush our fingers and crash on to the dogs, who have by now become demented by excitement. It is nearly dark and we can't quite see what we're doing, but finally we get the bloody things up, arrange the sleeping bags artfully, along their length and slither into them. As soon as we wriggle down into the bags the beds jack-knife. The dogs watch with grave and silent interest as our heads rise up and hit our knees, high in the air.

We climb, cumbersome, out of the bags, out from the vicious grip of the chairs, straighten them, arrange everything, and very delicately try again. This time, by dint of movements that would put you in mind of Noh theatre, we get settled: but we are afraid to move, so we lie side by side looking upwards to where a few crows, disturbed by us, are circling on their way back to the wood, cawing their displeasure. I remember lines from *Macbeth*... "light thickens and the crow makes wing to th' rooky wood. Good things of day begin to droop and drowse ..." and think not to go there towards night's black agents and instead try to remember the lines from Philip Larkin's poem – God, what a poet he was – about the couple, tum, tum de tum, how does it go... side by side, their faces blurred...

The earl and countess lie in stone  
Their proper habits vaguely shown  
As jointed armour, stiffened pleat  
And that faint hint of the absurd –  
The little dogs under their feet.

But they're not exactly the lines I want to remember. In any case, all poetic thoughts are flung out of my head as the dogs, who by now have almost swooned with pleasure as they, finally, realise that they are going to be sleeping outside for the night, suddenly come to their senses, remember they have a job to do and start to bark; and bark; and bark. One stops, the other starts: a leaf rustles, they bark; an owl hoots, they howl; a fox cries in the wood, their voices become unhinged with excitement; a pheasant rises with a squawk, they fall into a frenzy. The noise goes on and on and on. I turn my head to try to see my husband, to try to read from his face what he is feeling, what the state of our marriage is going to be in the morning. He hadn't wanted to do this in the first place. It was only because I badgered and fossicked about sleeping outside for so long that he is here at all

This has been going on a long time. I've wanted to sleep out under the stars ever since my cousin Maurice and his friend John Brown, both Boy Scouts, came to ►

◀ camp on the lough shore where we lived in Ireland. From then on, sleeping out in the open seemed as magic a thing to me as, say, having wings. Night after night I lay in my bedroom with the window open listening to dogs bark all along the lough shore and wishing I was out there with them in the dark.

But the years slipped away and this simple but fierce ambition remained unfulfilled. And then last year, the most beautiful summer ever, day after day and night after night of balmy, delicious weather, I finally saw that there was nothing to stop me. It was reading that gallant and moral poem *A Summer Night* by WH Auden that finally galvanised me.

I pretended, even to myself, that I was going to do it alone, in some secret tryst with my untamed soul, but I also knew fine well that at the last minute my husband would join me. Now there's a man who has slept out. We're talking here of a man who drove a train through western Brazil to the Bolivian border and slept

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beside the footplate; there's not a continent whose open skies he doesn't know. So he wasn't exactly palpitating with excitement. In fact I knew the whole idea filled him with a kind of mild horror. But he divined that at three o'clock in the morning in the middle of my beloved field I might not be as brave as I was at six in the evening in a crowded house. So, being the man he is, he gathered his singing robes about him and came along. Sorry, read grizzling robes there.

The moon rose, the dew fell. I hadn't known about dew. I thought dew was a light misting, a little spangled dampness for the grass overnight, one of nature's kindnesses. Here is the interesting bit. The Dew is a large, dripping, cold face flannel laid heavily along the surfaces of the night. It's a large wet eel that slithers down your orifices no matter how tucked away they be. Dew pressed wetly into the corners of my eyes. Dew soaked my hair. Dew ran in runnels into my ears. And the more the dew fell the more the dogs barked, partly to shake off the tidal wave of wet and partly because the night was alive with noise.

From every corner came moanings and whinings and breathings and sighings. Things nestled, pounced, fled, squealed, went silent. And every noise made the dogs more mad with excitement. Mona, the white bull terrier, barked the worst, and at one point, so desperate did my husband become, that he braved the Borgla-like scissoring effect of his camp bed, reached out, grabbed her and pushed her to the bottom of his sleeping bag, where she hung deep, like a large suspended sausage, over the bottom rail. At least she was silent, though I thought that might well be from

suffocation. We didn't sleep. We lay like the stone couple in the poem, staring at the studded scudding sky above and listening to the cacophony. We were dripping wet and frozen. The clouds came over and hid the stars and a keen wind sprang up. At five o'clock the birds woke and began their thunderous chorus.

"Are you awake?" I whispered.

"Awake?" he asked incredulously. "Am I awake?"

"Can we go home?"

With one bound we had flung ourselves out of the manky sleeping bags. Mona crawled up from the depths of her pit, well pleased with herself, and turned around and around in a white spinning circle while we shook ourselves and shivered and began the long trek home. From a neighbouring field I saw an early morning farmer watch us with his mouth opening and closing and then turn and run on his little stumpy legs to try to get Mrs Farmer out to share the fun before it had disappeared. I could have told him he had plenty of time. We could only walk very slowly, like old clockwork toys whose joints have rusted up.

We crept home through the glittering lane but, as we reached the house, the dogs thought it best to warn everyone. They all looked out of their warm windows and laughed at us, openly, for all I've done for them over the years. Fortunately, I come from a proud people and ignored them and went to bed.

All the same, it was worth it. Now in spring and summer I sleep out in a perfect compromise. I bought an Irish gypsy caravan (or van or wagon as I now know I must call it - *never* caravan) in Ireland and a man from Castleblaney with a cigarette in his mouth and fearlessness in his blood hitched it on to a trolley and ferried it across the water and bowled along the motorways to bring it here, pursued by police whom he shook off without a bother on him. It is painted and decorated and has a pair of lanterns and a place for a bale of hay and I sleep out in it most nights, watching out from under the hooped canvas, dry and snug but in the open air as the moon rises.

The dogs sleep on the ledges and steps and being above ground seems to mean they can relax and stop barking occasionally. The sheep sleep underneath and shift and stir in the dark. The cuckoo calls sometimes, an amazing sound in the night, and the owl and the wood pigeon. Sometimes the air is torn by a dreadful fight between two creatures and the dogs are instantly alert. So am I. It sounds like blue murder. But I go straight back to sleep.

I have become so accustomed to these strange sounds of the night air that they accompany me into my dreams. And as I drift to sleep I remember those Larkin lines I couldn't remember on that first disastrous night *en plein air* when the man I love loved me enough to share the dew and my dreams or, to be truthful, the lack of them,

... and to prove

Our almost-instinct almost true;

What will survive of us is love. ■

Extracted from *A Year in the Life of an English Meadow*, by Andy Garnett and Polly Devlin, published by Frances Lincoln at £20. To buy at a discount, see *Saga Books*, page 188