

The Road Accidentally Taken

The first camping trip taken with your best friend comes with certain expectations: you'll get the giggles drinking cheap wine, find your feet despite unsuitable footwear, and your bargain tent will almost definitely collapse. Some things are less expected, and driving into a cult is assuredly one of those less expected things.

The Penmaenmawr campsite was a two-hour drive from our English hometown and sat atop a hill looking over a sheltered bay of sand and pebbles. It was here that Jen and I discovered independence. We foraged in the wilderness (found a chippie), became at one with nature (took plenty of photos of sheep) and explored Snowdonia National Park by car just days after Jen got her driving licence. Here was a landscape steeped in legend, where dragons roamed the mountains and falcon calls went unheard under the roar of waterfalls which lined the valleys. We didn't bring the right clothing to climb Snowdon, but we did set up deckchairs in the carpark and look up at it.

Driving home to the city felt like admitting defeat, an agreement with the wilderness that we'd watch it slowly transform into concrete blocks before we'd discovered its secrets. At least we'd found confidence as young travellers. Well, we *were* feeling confident until we drove past the ominous *yellow sign*.

'What's that yellow sign?' Jen asked anxiously. 'We keep passing it.'

Our dilemma was that the sign was in Welsh and despite our best efforts to defy English stereotypes in language-learning the only headway we'd made was remembering 'bryn', which means hill, and I confess this was just because it was a character's name in sit-com 'Gavin and Stacey'.

'It looks exactly like a diversion sign,' I said.

'So you think I should follow it?'

'Yeah. Probably.' I replied. For I, my dear reader, am an idiot.

We followed the mysterious sign into heavy forest and down ever narrower tracks. Thick foliage left the road in shadow, decorated in places with speckled sunlight. Our plan? To complain and carry on: "*Why's it taking us further uphill? The main road's miles away! I hope we get out before it gets dark...*" and wait for a sign we wouldn't be lost forever. You know, the other sort of sign.

The mystical sort which appears at the right moment and doesn't send you into a terrifying... slow-moving line of traffic?!

Yep, deep in Middle-Of-Nowhere territory we turned a corner and joined a huge queue of other cars in the Middle-Of-Nowhere. Jen peered through the trees. 'Erm, Cass, I don't think we're meant to be here.'

We were surrounded by huge crowds approaching a clearing filled with coloured circus tents and alarmingly the majority of people were wearing hooded cloaks. A small procession walked past us deep in conversation, speaking in a strange melodious language. Girls with flowers in their hair skipped about in matching red dresses with white hemlines.

Jen looked pale, her hands gripping the steering wheel. 'What does a cult look like Cass? Is this what a cult looks like?!' With no other options we approached a man in a high-vis jacket who began directing us towards a field to park.

'We can't park! We came here by accident!'

'By accident?!' the Welshman exclaimed. 'How the heck did you get here by accident?'

'Well... we followed the signs. By accident.'

I've never seen anyone look so perplexed. I glanced nervously towards Jen. 'Why isn't he letting us out?' We could hear singing, a haunting yet beautiful harmony hanging in the air.

He frowned. 'You can get out that way, but one of you needs to get out the car.' We gulped. 'There's a cone over the exit; one of you will have to move it.'

We thanked him, relieved. Despite our incompetence thus far we found our way back to the motorway, although I did manage to break the cone on the way out.

'What d'you reckon that sign meant?' Jen pondered.

Noting signal had returned to my phone, I googled it. 'Oh.'

'Hm?'

'Eisteddfod.'

'Yes but what does it *mean*?'

'Eisteddfod. The Welsh music and literature festival dating back to the 12th century. It's a very popular festival.'

'So not a cult?'

'No. Stop being offensive.'

Travelling comes with certain expectations. There's an age-old debate wherein the road less taken is argued to be the better path, but I've come to realise that stories can lie both within hidden passageways and well-trodden lanes; whether or not one follows the signs, there's no way to predict what's ahead. Only one thing *can* be expected; there's a single road which brings excitement to even the most accomplished traveller no matter how many times she follows it. And that, assuredly, is the path that takes her home.