

skeoch

Our new life on a
Scottish hill farm



Jennie Phillips

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CHAPTER 1

Pulling the woolly balaclava hat off my head, I opened my eyes and peered over the bedclothes. A dim half-light, filtered through the window. The inside of the window was covered with ice that had made opaque, intricate patterns on the glass. I shivered. Somewhere a strange animal screeched. It was about 6.30am. Lying back on the pillow, I glanced around the room. Rather lurid, old-fashioned pink wallpaper decorated the walls and an elderly, tweedy pink carpet, the floor. There were no other concessions to luxury. I ached in every limb and the temperature in the room seemed well below freezing. I felt as though I had spent a night training with the S.A.S.

Slowly my disorientation disappeared and a little lurch of excitement touched my stomach as I remembered. Today was January 2nd 1972. Yesterday we had moved. Gone the luxury flat, the fitted carpets, the central heating, the hot water. Here, instead, we were in a little stone-built cottage, half way up a mountain - in Scotland, in the freezing cold. With a grate! In total isolation.

I lay for a while watching the still, recumbent figure of Conrad, my husband, all cosily cocooned in the folds of the eiderdown, his breath condensing on the air!

Too early to get up yet, too cold. Kate, our little daughter was still asleep in the corner of the room. I snuggled into the warmth of Conrad's back and let my mind drift back to the beginning.

This then, is the story about my husband, Conrad Phillips, a professional actor, my daughter Kate of two and a half, my 20 year old unemployed stepson Patrick and me - a pregnant wife, who all left their comfortable London house in Fulham and sallied forth into a world of self sufficiency and a new, clean life, away from care-worn London, city smoke and After Eight Mints. This is the story about Skeoch, a place that was to change my life completely.

I had met Conrad in the April of 1968, when I was working in a small

commercial film production company as a P/A cum do-it-all, finally graduating to the dizzy heights of Casting Director/P.A./cum-do-it-all!

Arrow Productions was run by a charismatic, ebullient chap called Ken Davies and the company was situated about 83 stairs up, on the top floor of a magnificent building in Orme Court in London. There was no lift, so there was no alternative but to hammer up and down the stairs several times a day. The staircase itself was a most impressive thing, wide sweeping with long brass stair rods, that were kept highly polished by Dot our lovely Welsh cleaning lady.

We shared the building with the two comedy writers, Ray Galton and Alan Simpson and the comedians Frankie Howerd, Eric Sykes and Spike Milligan! It was a fun time, when BIBA was THE place to shop and all you needed was love, love, love.....

Conrad and I met through a Curry's commercial that Arrow Productions were making and, as the Casting Director, I liaised a fair amount on the telephone with him about fee and wardrobe etc.

It was to be a 60's commercial, based on a James Bond type theme, with Conrad dressed as 'James' and a gorgeous lady with long blonde hair, as his....assistant. (Also cast by me.) It was filmed in a disused warehouse, somewhere in Camden Town. Not the most exciting location to meet your future husband.

Through a series of minor disasters in the office, I missed the main part of the film shoot and finally met Conrad for the last five minutes, on the last day of filming.

We married ten weeks later in Chelsea Registry Office. You could call it a whirlwind romance I suppose.

Due to a divorce settlement, Conrad left his previous marriage with absolutely nothing. In spite of starring in a well known television series and working in many films and the theatre, we started our married life together penniless, in one room, off the Bayswater Road, with only a gas ring on the wooden floor and a single

bed. That was two years previously and it was the Swinging Sixties and "all things were possible in this, the best of all possible worlds".....

As I became pregnant on our honeymoon, Conrad extended our single bed to accommodate my increasing girth. He was destined never to be without a screwdriver in his hand for almost the remainder of his life, poor soul!

We laughed a lot, loved a lot and lived on the princely sum of £10 a week, including rent and food - but the accommodation was becoming cramped with the arrival of Kate, our daughter and even more so when Patrick, Conrad's 17-year-old son by his previous marriage, arrived on our doorstep one evening, with his small brown case and asked if he could come and live with us.

We got another room in the house, then another but the need to have something of our own, was becoming more important.

The place of our own finally became possible when Conrad landed a year's hard work on a BBC television series called The Newcomers. This enabled us to put down a deposit on a large Victorian semi-detached house in Fulham and enabled us equally, to get a mortgage. It was a big, impersonal house, but redeemed itself with some nice features. High moulded ceilings and a few pretty fireplaces and the traffic thundered by outside.

The whole of the downstairs of the 13 rooms, we let, to young, upwardly mobile people, retaining only the top self-contained flat for ourselves. Patrick moved in with us and had his own room on the floor below, with enough privacy for him to feel unrestricted but also safe in the knowledge that we were only upstairs if he needed us.

For a time it worked perfectly well and we were a happy, contained unit with our daughter Kate, who by then was 18 months old.

After I left Arrow Productions to have Kate, I did temporary work occasionally, as and when we needed an extra injection of cash. There was no shortage of freelance work in London then and it fitted in very well with our life

style. When Conrad acted I stayed at home and looked after Kate. When he didn't, he stayed home and I worked. It was the modern marriage and Conrad was very happy to embrace another crack at fatherhood. However, after a year, we started to feel a bit jaded. 'Fash Fulham' was losing it's charm and I was appalled that every time I took Kate for a walk on Parsons Green, we could only walk about 2 yards before coming into contact with dog mess and litter. There were not the doggie laws that currently apply. After a shower of rain on a hot Sunday afternoon, the smell that rose up from the pavements was disgusting.

The local infant school, that Kate in due course would attend, was jammed to overflowing, with little faces crowding at the bars of the playground. It was a large Dickensian red brick building, with very little space for the children to skip and play around. The need for some fresh, clean air, green grass and a bush or two, was becoming more apparent. I just couldn't picture Katie in that school. We were feeling claustrophobic.

One day Conrad came home from filming, looking quite excited.

"You know Jen, I've been working out our finances and I reckon, if we re-adjusted our life style, I could get enough money together to buy us a cottage, somewhere in the country".

It seemed a wonderful idea and it became the dominating theme in all our conversations. Although it certainly seemed a good possibility, strangely enough I also felt rather apprehensive. I was brought up, for a lot of my childhood, in some of the more remote parts of the country. Small villages in Devon and Suffolk and I had a creeping fear that we might find ourselves in some outlandish area, with no street lights, outside loos and one village shop. I wasn't sure I liked the idea. I mean, it all looks very pretty on a post card.....

We talked things over and finally agreed that it would be best if we looked for a week-end cottage that we could go to for holidays, perhaps gradually improve and 'do up'. Somewhere, we thought, near the coast. Dorset seemed ideal.

The idea gradually took shape and so we went, one dripping Saturday,

down to Dorset. The rain lashed the windscreen in a steady deluge. The sky was grim and laden with plenty more to come. Not a promising start. Warily we squelched to various estate agents and looked at various properties but any that we really liked were totally out of our price range. The bracing wind and gun metal grey sea, only served to depress us further. Our gloom was contagious and in desperation, we headed back for London, abandoning the idea of Dorset. It is amazing to think in retrospect, that if the day had been sunny, our whole outlook might have changed, we might never have moved up to Scotland and we would not have so radically changed our lives.

Our life settled down again in it's irregular pattern. Having a husband who is an actor, can be many things - but one thing it isn't - and that's dull. We continued to alternate between being 'rich' and 'poor'.

I have to state right now that we never had any intention of buying a farm. Least of all in South West Scotland. It wasn't one of those nice, rational decisions that we all think we will make, when the time comes. It was totally irrational and made absolutely no sense at all - but we made it just the same!

The whole event was rather precipitated by my mother and sister who, dissatisfied with their lives in Bedfordshire, where they had been living for some time, left and finally took the High Road, in an attempt to find some security, peace and proper tranquillity. They were now happily ensconced in a grey granite house, built to keep the Scottish winds at bay, right on a wild bit of coast, at a place called Gatehouse-of-Fleet, in Kirkcudbrightshire, on the Solway.

Through the end of their garden, was a path that led down to a totally private stretch of beach, that continued for miles. It was a piece of heaven.

On a week-end telephone call from my mum, despondently we told her that we had been looking for a country cottage, without luck.

"You sound as if you could both do with a break" she said. "We've settled in beautifully now. Why don't you come up and stay with us for a few days?"

It seemed like a good idea and a week or so later, we headed up North.

We left Fulham on a grey, cold, drizzling Autumn morning. The car was filled with flasks of coffee, sandwiches, maps and hastily written instructions from my mum, none of which seemed to make sense. Katie was bundled in with the travel rug and toys, juice and emergency nappies and off we set, emerging some 6 hours later into the quaint little town of Gatehouse-of-Fleet.

Our stay was really what we needed. A complete break away from London and leisurely walks along the secluded beach with Kate, exploring rock pools and making sand castles.

We looked at various cottages in the immediate area, more out of curiosity than serious intent. One little house in the nearby village of Castle Douglas, some four miles away, was offered for sale with a guide price of £1,800. We had a look round. It needed a fair bit doing to it but it was very solidly constructed and quite charming. In a moment of madness we put in a sealed offer for it, almost as a joke - and crossed our fingers. It was too good to be true and we were not surprised to be pipped to the post. I think it went for £2,000.

Reason told us that anyway Scotland was too far. Logic told us it was totally out of the question. We had a lovely few days in the countryside and decided to forget the idea of a country property for the time being.

Haste Ye Back the roadway sign read as we thundered back over the border and headed for London. Was I imagining a lump in my throat when I read it? Probably not - it turned out to be morning sickness!

A few weeks later my mother phoned again.

"Jen are you still looking?" she enquired.

I told her that we had given up the idea for the time being but that we had discovered that I was pregnant again. She was delighted and after all the grandmotherly things being said, the conversation veered round to the fact that she had heard of a farm for sale, some 40 miles from her. It wasn't a very big farm. She

thought it was up a track; possibly up a small mountain. She was a little vague, but it was very reasonably priced, she had been told. Why didn't we at least go and look at it?

Conrad and I both laughed. A farm. Ridiculous. We knew nothing whatever about farming - out of the question. So much for reason and logic though because a few weeks later saw us north of the border again. I don't think either of us seriously thought anything would materialise from the trip. However....

We studied the map. Turn right off the A75. Fine. Through the tiny village of Shawhead. That must have been what we had just driven through and blinked. OK. Unbelievably pretty countryside and BIG skies. Winding country lanes. No street lights here, I noted! Hmm. Follow the road, turn left at the village Post Office (one village shop, I also noted). Turn right. A small brook burred and rushed over stones, beneath a charming 'Brig-a-Doon' stone bridge, covered with the silvery grey of lichen. The weather was fantastic; the clear Autumn light illuminating the breathtaking views in fine detail. Lovely.

Finally Conrad pulled the car over.

"It's got to be around here somewhere" he said. "Let me have a look at the map".

We both peered at it.

"That has to be it - up there" he said, pointing vaguely to a pot holed, overgrown track, that disappeared into a mass of brambles and undergrowth.

"Are you sure?" I queried. "It looks as though it leads nowhere".

"There's one way to find out" he said. Sure enough, a battered sign, the paint peeling off, simply said - SKEOCH.

We followed the long rutted lane for some distance, upwards, passing slowly a tiny gypsy caravan, parked happily in a clearing, where the track widened a little. It's little chimney belching out clouds of wood smoke. A savage black Alsatian

dog, leashed nearby, jumped and barked ferociously. We were starting to feel a bit apprehensive. There must be some mistake. We had obviously taken a wrong turning. Apart from the caravan, all we could see were fields and hills. Then, over to the left, the great purple mound of Skeoch Mount, looming large and forbidding. We carried on slowly up the rutted lane and finally pulled into a large concrete courtyard, surrounded by cattle byres and a Dutch Barn.

Nestling in a hollow, further on, sat a small, squat, stone-built cottage. We could see the chimney needed re-pointing immediately, as the smoke came out not only at the top but at various other points en route. We stopped the car and stepped out. We were half way up a mountain!

We wandered to the cottage door, trying to take everything in. After Fulham, the space seemed amazing. Not a building in sight - just acres and acres of fields, hills and trees and the air was so clean and fresh.

"Well, I must say," Conrad said. "I thought your Mother said it was a small farm! This looks bloody enormous. I mean - look at it".

I had to agree with him. There certainly seemed a lot of it but one didn't really know then, where this farm ended and someone else's land started. I couldn't wait to explore. The backdrop of Skeoch Mount gave everything a slightly theatrical air. It could have been a film set.

The front door opened.

"You've arrived then". Mrs Moody, the owner, stepped out to greet us, offering her hand.

She was dressed in an old grey tweed coat that had seen better days, tied around the middle with a length of bailer twine, stout lisle stockings and thick brogue shoes. She ushered us into the house.

Catherine Moody was an ample lady, with thick, white hair, cropped mannishly and gripped securely in a no-nonsense fashion, on the side. Her face was generous and canny, with more than a touch of humour around her mouth. Eyeing

us quizzically, she gave us a very old-fashioned look when she discovered, during the course of conversation, that Conrad was an actor. You could almost read her thought processes....."An Englishman, a townie AND an actor. Very airy, fairy dear. Hardly farming material....."

However, the kettle was put on for a pot of tea, while we were shown round the cottage.

Comfortable was not one of the words that would spring to mind in describing it. The accommodation was extremely basic and comprised of a very small, unmodernised kitchen, with well worn lino flooring in a tempting shade of cow pat brown. By the side of this there was a narrow, unlit corridor that had a tiny loo and bathroom at the end, with flooring to match the kitchen. The sitting room was dark wood panelled with a very unattractive shiny brown tiled fireplace and grate as the sole feature, apart that is, from the post war metal, single glazed, casement window that looked out on to the back garden and view beyond. But what a view; what a superb, uncluttered, unspoilt, uninterrupted view. It was magic!

Through the sitting room was a little square hall, one bedroom to the left (the one in pink) and one straight ahead. A further storage room led off this, with old metal french doors leading to the garden. Tacked on to the back of the cottage was a rather broken 'conservatory' with odd broken panes of glass and peeling green paint. A sliding door in the hall revealed a small flight of attic stairs, at the top of which were two rooms with sloping ceilings and tiny velux windows. That was it. The walls in the kitchen were running with condensation and the fire in the grate coughed cheerlessly, throwing out hardly any heat but a good deal of smoke. Talk about Cold Comfort Farm! Yet there was nothing of major proportions that was wrong with the place. Nothing that some new decoration, cosy lighting and a few creature comforts wouldn't put right, we felt sure. Fortunately Conrad and I both have the ability to see through the dross, to the nugget of gold and are not easily put off by cosmetic imperfections! It was a stout little house in need of a lot of TLC but perfectly adequate for our family needs. At this stage you have to bear in mind that we still didn't really have a firm idea of WHAT we were going to do anyway.

We looked around the outside with Mrs. Moody. Two stone pig sties sat in a small field to the left of the house. Across the wide courtyard, ran a series of whitewashed cattle byres in an L formation, with stable doors and shutters. A vast Dutch Barn, perched on a concrete base, at the edge of the courtyard, looked out over a patchwork of hills and fields. Not another building was anywhere in sight. There seemed so much of everything. So much to take in and after rambling over various acres, we came to a picturesque wood, with a lazy stream meandering through. It was enchanting. Mrs. Moody caught the expression on our faces and smiled.

"It's beautiful" we murmured.

"Aye - it's two and a half acres in all" she said and after a pause "included in the sale".

I looked at Conrad - our own forest!

We finally returned to the yard in a rather euphoric state. The red and gold November setting sun was illuminating a beautiful rowan tree in full berry, on the corner of the courtyard. It looked as if it were on fire.

Before the afternoon was completely through, we found ourselves striking a deal with Mrs. Moody and promptly drove into Dumfries, the nearest town, to Thompson, Roddick and Laurie - Auctioneers and Estate Agents, to sign the Deed. Just like that. The whole thing had a dream-like quality to it but this was no dream; this was committal. There was no way out now - we were becoming apprentice owners of a fifty acre hill farm in South West Scotland!

The real enormity of what we had done hit us a few days later, when some of the euphoria had left us and we were back in London. This was no 'week-end cottage' - this was 'change your life' time. What on earth were we doing?

