



Jonathan Self

Abed and boarded

Back trouble in its organic form

HALFWAY through the week I took to my bed. There is a long Irish tradition of people taking to their beds. Aoife of Connacht, for instance, took to her bed for a year, rising only to turn her stepchildren into swans and Darby Ruadh of Aughinish took to his bed for a similar period after falling in love with a woman he had seen in a river. My retreat to bed was the result of being tossed by a dreadful boar. While trying to tag my new herd of pigs, the boar snuck up behind me, inserted his head between my legs and pushed. Over I went, to squeals of porcine delight, putting my back out badly in the process.

Always keen to lounge about in pyjamas, my enforced rest seemed an ideal opportunity to catch up with paperwork. I began by re-studying the Good Tagging Practice instructions as issued by An Roinn Talmhaíochta Bia. These feature photographs of model pigs which not only wait patiently to be tagged, but lean forward helpfully so that their ears are at just the right angle when it is their turn. After resolving to speak firmly to my own pigs about their behaviour—they fail to grasp that it takes two to tag—I tried to get to grips with the National Pig Identification and Tracing System and the Aujeszky's Disease Eradication Programme. A six-page questionnaire regarding the latter was a good excuse

to dip into *Black's Veterinary Dictionary*. Reassured that none of my herd were displaying symptoms of Aujeszky's Disease (intense itching, anorexia and dullness), I spent a happy couple of hours reading about, among other things, the correct and incorrect way to carry a cat with a suspected limb fracture and how to identify rabbit syphilis. I have often thought that *Black's* would be the perfect gift for the man who has everything (although, hopefully, none of the animal diseases it describes) and it was only with the greatest effort that I was able to tear myself away from its fascinating text and illustrations to deal with more pressing matters.

One of the pressing matters that has been on my mind of late is whether or not it is worth becoming an organic producer, and since the thought of having to plough through the registration documentation,

*'If you have a bad back,
everyone insists that they
know the only person
who can make it better'*

application forms and regulations manual (which alone is the size of a telephone directory) has been making me feel dizzy since it all arrived several weeks ago, bed seemed to be the perfect place to decide the question. After a day and a half of study, I arrived at

Darling spends her day eating snails



the conclusion that although I am following best organic practice there is nothing to be gained by certification, so why get involved in yet more red tape? A straw poll of neighbouring farmers with what I would call 'green sympathies' revealed that I am not alone in considering the organic administration process more bother than it is worth. I am sorry about this because in principle I am pro-organic.

Darling, my four-month-old English pointer puppy, is also clearly pro-organic since she spends her day eating snails from the garden. Although I admonish her, secretly I am rather pleased. The decision to name her after my last pointer has met with considerable resistance on the domestic front. I have caught both my housekeepers calling her Daisy behind my back, and my son, Bert, openly calls her Lucky. But in a dog-eat-snail world she is a Darling and I am sticking to my guns. Her only drawback is that she is capable of a vertical takeoff leap that would put a frog to shame. A few days after she arrived I turned my back on her for an instant and when I looked round again she was up on the kitchen table wolfing down bulbs of garlic. Presumably to accompany the snails.

Mention that you have a bad back and everyone insists that they know the only person in the world who can make it better. Having visited innumerable experts, I didn't rush to follow a suggestion that I try Irene Phillips of the Backcare Clinic—the only osteopath in the UK to employ a piece of equipment called a Technology-Assisted Micro-manipulation and Reflex Stimulation (TAMARS) unit. However, when Ben Hunt, a *Financial Times* writer, described the relief he had obtained at her clinic after 15 years of agony, I decided it might just be worth rising from my bed to consult her. Now I am in a position to insist that I know the only person in the world who can make bad backs better. The only downside to being cured, however, is that I no longer have an excuse to take to my bed.

ILLUSTRATION: CLARE MACKIE

Jonathan Self lives in West Cork and is a special adviser to the World Land Trust