

CHAPTER VI

A Boat Beneath a Sunny Sky

THERE WASN'T MUCH that actually happened that summer. Hardly anything really of note. Every now and again I'd accompany Richard to his gardening jobs in his juddering juggernaut of a Land Rover. Propped up against the bar in The Golden Lion we would hold court amongst the free thinkers and stalwart patrons of Mitchells and Butlers draught ales. I was doing voluntary work at an inner city farm in Birmingham and the skies were mostly blue and swept with towering banks of brilliant white cloud while I dug, weeded and harvested below. Produce was regularly doled out among the volunteers, and I would happily potter homewards in my Mini Metro, the passenger seat heaped with ears of sweetcorn, bunches of chard, strings of vine tomatoes and scarily verdant looking cucumbers. Exhausted but satisfied I would climb into a boiling bath and scrub myself violently until I emerged every nerve end fizzing, feeling radiantly alive and new. Reinvigorated I would then potter off to the pub or round to Richard's where we sat in his garden or front room watching his enormous video collection of golden era Hollywood comedies, chatting and making each other laugh. All in all, nothing much, just a couple of mates having a laugh.

THAT WASN'T ALL that happened though. That summer as we sat and chatted we created our own rabbit hole and headed off down it to explore the world that opened up inside it.

HAWTHORNE, BAY WILLOW, WYCH ELM, cherry, birch and of course oak all grow in abundance in our world. Elegant,

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immemorial trees. Green cathedrals of dizzying span, roots reaching deep into the supporting soil, collecting deep subterranean water and carrying it into the sky. A tree is an organic skin around a spectacular fountain, sucking water from way below our feet and launching it high above our heads to be evaporated out through the leaves, cleaning the air of our exhalations, releasing cool blue oxygen. There are open spaces among the trees, rays of sunlight illuminating the thin mists, drawing shifting fanned lines in the very air itself, ending in vigorous flares of colour on the ground. Elders cling in those spaces, plates of white flowers showering yellow lemonade pollen in the spring sunlight. Silver birches stand in elegant lines, single trunks with regularly spaced branches, forming inviting ladders high up into the sky. Often we climb them, leaving the ground far below in a dizzying concave perspective, and from their higher branches we can see lines of distant hills ridden by blackened, ruined castles on the very edge of vision, ancient, strange and dangerous. Further above us still there is the soulless, lonely cry of a buzzard, floating in circles, a tumbling cross in the blue.

Deep within our wooded glade are tunnel-like holloways, ancient pathways cutting a bell distribution curved channel through the soil, broken by dark twines of roots, green with warm moss which support arched trees forming a pillared wall and green vaulted roof. Along these holloways we run, with a clean breeze at our heels blowing leaves and dandelion seeds and dancing butterflies along with us. Where the branches thin and allow bright warm patches of sunlight to warm the forest floor, we lie down and sleep, or prop ourselves against the tree trunks, lay out paints, brushes, paper and inks around us and paint in vigorous colours and bold lines. Nymphs can occasionally be glimpsed running far ahead of us along the holloways, indistinct in the blue green distance, their hair, skirts and trails ebb, billow and gush around them. There are times as we lie in the sun when sight and sound become intermixed, heightened and vivid, the

sunlight becomes a rolling champagne fluid, an effervescing mist that emits light rather than obscures it. Half seen, half dreamt the fern leaves around us rock and spin with their own energy, the crickets become silent and a distant unearthly laughter rings in descending peals from the green ceiling. Eerie little gardens can be found between the exposed tree roots, planted with violets, harebells and buttercups and surrounded by lines of coloured pebbles.

Nighttime disperses the sun's heat that had built up to a narcoleptic blanket in the afternoon. The gentle cooling of the evening sharpens the senses, peeling away the drowsy daydreams and green miasmas of the woods. High above, the moon emits silver filaments of light and for a few precious hours the wood changes from a place filled with life to a perfectly still portrait of itself, exquisitely executed by etching black paint from silvered foil. Each leaf, each branch is lined with a pearl edge that shows its form with an iridescent accuracy, more revealing and true than during the daytime flood of sunlight. But this crystalline world seems too delicate for us to intrude upon as if it is seen as a reflection in black water. One touch would break it into crazily dancing fragments. We wait in the cool air purely as observers, not participants. Soon the moon dips below the horizon and the woods return to a profound waiting darkness, but the air is now moving, fresh and clean telling us of the upcoming burst of potential. Pale lavender light creeps along the horizon and the trees reappear in silhouette as the light grows stronger and richer. Resonating with the growing light there is a strange flowing music, almost unheard by ear, but which sings in a deeper consciousness. It forms and disperses, cajoles and dances, creating a longing in all that hear it that cannot be described or fulfilled. The light deepens and becomes strong enough to illuminate a grass and celandine lined dell within the trees. Gently, imperceptibly the trees begin to colour, the thin milky light picking out the edges and contours of the branches first and then progressively exploring the

crevices and textures of the bark. Overhead a few wisps of cloud in the apricot sky catch the sun's rays from below the horizon and explode into shavings of brilliant copper. The music becomes more compelling, rolling tensions together, yearning for a crescendo and resolution. Moments extend between heartbeats, the horizon diffuses uncountable broken spectra that undulate, harmonise and reform, weaving around the music in synesthesia. In these few moments, the line between night and day is breached and the music finally resolves to an unexpected but serene harmony which speaks of the coming day and all its potential. Xanthogenic tendrils of light shoot from the horizon and the day begins, but in that moment we feel that we have seen something more than we remember, that we have been in the presence of something more profound than just a sunrise in a wooded dell. Enchantments are dispersed by the daylight, and we realise that the unearthly music is simply the dawn chorus, detonating like aural fireworks around us. Deep within us though, there is a voice that doesn't speak in words that we can repeat or articulate, a voice that pares away at rationality and certainty. We had heard and seen something more than a sunrise and the dawn chorus. Inside we know that we had passed through something unseen.

The day brightens, the birds calm down and we walk through the trees, Richard expounding on their nature, personalities and folklore. He walks as ever in his characteristic way, each foot precisely placed slightly further out to the side than you would expect, as I meander behind, listening to his voice in the same way that I listen to a song, more interested in the melody than the words.

Then we leave the wood and walk along the path that skirts its edge, trees on one side, a great billowing sea of barley on the other which draws the patterns of the wind on its surface, intertwining and releasing like a drip of ink dropped in clean water magnified onto the landscape. Here and there larks race into the sky, singing with a lucid joy. Enticing us

into the barley field with a wave of his gloved hand is a black and green scarecrow. Ringing the horizon are gentle hills, several with giant white figures cut into their grass by unknown hands with unknown intent. Underneath us cross paths trodden by ancient feet which stepped processional from one sacred stone circled space to another, watched and guided by the figures etched in the hillsides.

Drifting further along the path we come to a ridge edge, the woods descend the ridge and flood out as a green dress adorning the landscape. Dazzled by the morning sun we shade our eyes and try to stare into the pale blue grey ambiguity where the sky meets the land. Escaping our line of perception for a fleeting moment we see ourselves from above as points in the terrain as we would be seen by the bubbling larks. Richard and I are dwarfed by the world, but stand as its central point, like everyone else we are the centre of the observable universe, this is our created world and we have full agency in it. Supposing we wanted to we could make the sky sit below the horizon and the trees above, but that would be impolite somehow. Our world might be a nothing more than a shared flare in our collective neurones, but fantasy not built in reality is just empty baubles.

Moments later our perception returns to our eyes and we descend the ridge, following the path back into the woods that lie beneath the ridge in a darkened valley. Ever deeper and deeper into the trees we go until the sunlight is lost and we find a darkness where unchancy shapes inhabit the spaces between the leafless, empty trees. Twisted, angular claws form amongst the branches in periphery vision, but then dissolve when we turn to look. Inaudible voices issue threats and curses on the cold dry air. Malnourished blackened and cruel, the trees are stitched into the grey air as rough, tight yarn. Everywhere the life of the trees has been replaced, not by death, which is the lack of life, but an un-life, its opposite, a will to destroy and unmake. Still, we don't fear this part of

the woods, we know that it is here that the best stories come from.

Necrotic spiders weave deadly filaments which capture and hold the darkness. Old, dead mosses hang like flayed skin from the trees' branches. Thorns as dry as ashes and sharp as snares wind witch doctors' teeth necklaces through the branches, gently swaying despite there being no movement in the grey air to push them. A black path, not trodden by living feet, traces an angular irrational path among the exposed roots, it has no source or destination, it merely serves to entrap and derange the unwary. Something ancient and watchful inhabits the spaces between breaths, waiting. Time is on its side, whatever it is. It knows it simply has to wait, it doesn't need traps or poisons or teeth or claws, just the passage of time will eventually render the living things that it hates as soil beneath the ground which it can slip its dagger like roots into and gorge itself on their rotting nutrients.

Caught in the centre of this malevolent gully in the forest is a dark house, cut in half by a jagged crack that runs through the masonry from foundations to roof. Knuckles of broken stone pock across the house's facia, pushing the windows, eaves and gables to crazy angles. Occult symbols are scratched in the broken plaster above the door. Faces, or something very like them, white skinned and black eyed can be seen at midnight, blurred behind the grimy, cobwebbed windows, staring into the darkness. Inside stands an old table with a half empty bottle of elderberry wine and glasses on it. To the left there is a closed window seat and behind the table there is an open door showing steps down into the cellar, flickering candlelight illuminates the back wall and muffled but distinct there is the sound of digging coming from the gloomy basement.

Looking away from this shadowed expanse, light and warmth returns. Emerging from the trees there is a house and garden set a distance from a two track unmetalled road. Fields and busy allotment plots are dotted around the house

and the road. The house is nothing special as houses go, the large garden is mostly well kept but the further you get from the house the wilder the garden gets and it is difficult to tell where the garden ends and the woods begin. On a sloped patch of ground are seven plant beds arranged in concentric circles, and within the central circle stands a beautifully designed brass orrery which tracks the motion of the planets through the sky. Finely crafted gears mesh with fiendish intricacy to move models of the sun, the moon and each of the planets around the inside of a skeleton globe decorated over with crystals that map the stars and elegant filigree representations of the constellations. Central to the globe, which is large enough for a person to stand in, is a wooden handled crank which once turned engages the mechanism and moves the planets' alignments further by one day, rotates the globe so that the crystals perfectly map the positions of the stars in the sky and also turns over a calendar which shows the date that the alignments match. One who stands next to the handle will see the planets and stars of the orrery around them in perfect alignment to their positions in the sky, and so day or night, fair weather or foul it is always possible to stand and see heavenly symmetries and conjunctions. Un-speakably beautiful are the clear nights when the starlight from each star is refracted perfectly through its crystal representation in the orrery, shattering light that has travelled to us over countless millennia into burning spectra around the viewer's head.

Ringed round the orrery is the first plant bed filled with hot, brilliant plants. Sharp pointed Rosemary, the decoction of which quickens the senses and undims the eyes. St John's Wort, helpful against tertian and quartan agues, spreads its sparkling yellow petals. Effulgent peonies and corn marigolds grow together, effective against all fevers and nightmares.

Immediately surrounding this central bed are the quick and vigorous plants. Various lavenders grow in bee molested purple pillows, two spoonfuls of their distilled flower water

known to still the tremblings and passions of the heart. Effective at staying the falling out of the tresses, White Maidenhair entwines with Jack-by-the-Hedge (known also as Sauce-Alone or Common Garlic Cress) which is good as a hedge mustard for the cough. Stalks of caraway, quicker and better to taste than aniseed, open into umbels of white flowers.

Then in the next bed are the plants of distant and un-touchable beauty and pure love. Infused in wine, the petals of the abundant common Mugwort is a certain help for sciatica and for the over-much taking of opium. Long tendrils of Rampion dip and whirl in the breeze, the taste of its flower being a witch's price for a first born. Leafy Speedwell trails through the bed, helpful against all pestilences. Great, self seeded banks of Columbine spread among the bed, used in lotions to cure soreness of the throat.

Outside this ring are bedded plants of white and silver, White Saxifrage and Purslane, their juices good for inflammations in the secret parts and to break the stone. The angular seeds of the Fleur-de-Lys are ground as a remedy against the bitings and stings of all venomous creatures. An overdose of the milky juice of the white poppies will cause immoderate mirth or stupidity, deep sleep, accompanied by turbulent dreams, cold sweats and frequently death.

Lying outside this deadly but inviting ring is a violent red and hot circle of plants. Laying its alizarin roots underground is a creeping tangle of Madder, the beaten leaves of which will remove any deformity of the skin. There are banks of nettles, their seeds being an admirable tonic against the poisonous qualities of hemlock, henbane, nightshade, mandrake or such herbs as stupefy the senses. Hawthorn bushes, fairy haunted, grow in blackened tangles, the distilled water of which is useful when applied to any place pierced with thorns and splinters as it will draw them out. In addition grows Rest Harrow (also called Cammock) which like the Hawthorn is covered in sharp thorns, a decoction of which cleans sores from the mouth.

Spiralling around this violent bed is a planting of the flowers of kings and rulers. Sweet Chervil warms cold and old stomachs and preserves against the plague. New and tender sage leaves grow, filling the air with their sweet aroma. Once bruised and mixed with a little pure water they work wonderfully against lowness of spirit. Wild Briar or Rose Hip form low hedges through the spiral planting, their flowers and fruit strengthen the heart and liver, cool inflammation and procure rest and sleep. Twined through the spiral planting grow abundant Dandelions (called *Piss-a-Beds* by the vulgar) known to be a wonderful comfort to those whose body is growing towards an evil disposition.

On the outskirts of the concentric beds are plants that are old, cold and grey. Dotted in amongst this bed grow Saracen's Consound, the decocted juice of which cleans green wounds and corruptions. Oils made from the infusion of White Mullein flowers, which grow in sword-like spikes, can be dissolved in red wine and water, and then if red hot steel has been quenched therein opens obstructions of the bladder and reins. White flowers of Common Nightshade decorate branched stalks, not dangerous to health in the way that its familiar cousin Deadly Nightshade is, but must be used moderately. Hot inflammations are eased by the clarified juices mixed with a little vinegar. At the very edge of bed grows Hemlock with its crooked root and ill-favoured scent. Taken inwardly it is exceedingly cold and dangerous, but it has value applied externally to red and swollen eyes.

In autumn the rest of the garden is pock marked by great circles of mushrooms, which burst into phosphorescent coloured caps overnight and then are gone when the weather changes. Lining the edges of the garden are coloured stones which change shade with the seasons.

In the middle of the wide lawn stands a rotary washing line. Knotted on the line are great white sheets which billow and dance like clouds in the wind. Every day the lady who lives in the house ties sheets to the line. When she takes the

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sheets out of her basket she dances with them and if you didn't know better you'd think that the sheets are dancing with her too. In and out of the hanging sheets she dances, whirling the wet sheets into the air, tumbling and falling they catch perfectly onto the spinning line. The lady has hair as white as the sheets but a face as young as the spring. Her windows are always open, even in the winter and she welcomes the winds into her house as valued guests. On and on she dances with the winds in her hair, dancing in the garden and dancing in her house.

Near to the edge of the garden where it meets the edge of the woods bubbles the source of a stream. Easy and clear it works its way along the edge of the wood, gathering force and speed, then it works its determined way downhill and cross country, joined by other vigorous streams sourced in high hills and ice peaked mountains, until it flows into a wide millpond. Mingling in the shade of the weeping willows that surround the pond are lazy trout, occasionally gulping at the winged insects that skim the still water. Up at the head of the pond stands the mill itself. Strange is the word that occurs to most people when they first see that mill.

The weight of the water is channeled into a vigorous flume that pushes round a water wheel. Nailed or tied with lengths of binder twine and packaging string to the wheel are a collection of buckets of varying sizes, colours and states of dilapidation. Towards the top of the wheel they fill with water and the weight pulls them down and the wheel round until they reach the bottom where by a complicated series of pulleys powered by the movement of the wheel, a pole finishing in a carved wooden hand wearing a 1950's traffic policeman's glove snaps forward and flips each bucket over, releasing its contents into the tail race to flow off further downstream. Cycling around the empty buckets are then carried back upwards for the process to repeat. Over and over this haphazard process occurs. Many of the buckets have holes in them and the water leaks out of them in graceful arcs, spray-

ing water around the wheel in fiendishly complex, animated, never repeating spirograph patterns. Pressure in the flume increases on rainy days and the wheel moves faster as does the gloved hand while the increased centrifugal force sprays the water in ever greater patterns until some critical speed is achieved. Lashing round, the wheel turns so fast that the flipped buckets don't have chance to fall back into their position to catch the water from the flume and are instead themselves blasted round by the force of the water from the flume. All the buckets become waterwheels in their own right flying around on the edge of the wooden wheel, hurling great fountains of water all round the mill in a massive soggy Catherine wheel display. If the sun comes out of the rainclouds when the waterwheel is doing this then its light is broken into many competing and whirling rainbows and for a few moments this simple utilitarian power source becomes a sight of True Beauty. Nearby, doors will be flung open as people from all around rush from their houses clutching umbrellas and waxed sou'westers to see this phenomenon.

Yet if the wheel goes faster and faster hurling water in all directions threatening to get completely out of control, a cunningly designed limiter inside the mill will apply a juddering brake to the wheel and stop it dead. Once this happens the energy in the wheel is displaced into the water it carries which is thrown in a thunderous fountain high into the air. Urgent, tense moments of ominous silence are followed by the desperate flapping of wings and quacking as the ducks on the millpond, who have learnt exactly what is going to happen next, take to the air to get away as soon as possible. All at once the great mass of flying water comes crashing back into the dead centre of the pond, exploding its normally placid surface into chaotic tsunamis which race to the banks, erupting all over the umbrellas and sou'westers of the watching crowds, many of whom are washed with the back flow into the millpond and have to be rescued with bargepoles, sodden but happy.

Lamentably, this is not all.

Lacking any respect for the laws of fluid flow dynamics, on certain days, when the moon is in a third quadrant, when the sky is filled with clouds of a certain form, when flowers of a certain colour bloom on the millpond banks and the wind is in a certain direction, for reasons that have defeated the cleverest hydrology engineers in all the land, the wheel will, of its own accord, reverse its direction and start feeding water from the tail race into the flume, reversing for one strange evening the whole flow of the stream.

There is no-one alive or dead who knows how or why. However there is one single purpose that this this reversal seems to fulfil and that is to spectacularly annoy the stream's salmon who spend all night fighting their way along the stream in the way that they think is upstream, only for the wheel to reverse to normal in the morning and the furious salmon discover that they are even further from their spawning grounds than they thought they were. In the local area the stream is known as Vexed Salmon Brook for precisely this reason.

Nailed haphazardly to the centre of the waterwheel is a mighty turning shaft that provides power for all the machines inside the mill. Kinetic energy travels in ponderously spinning circles around the shaft into a collection of heaving, grinding gears and cam wheels which convert the motion into fleet spindles that drive the quick and light machinery, or into slow and relentless beams that drive the machines that push and grind. Inside the mill are divers machines, clattering, whirring and thundering, each one carefully crafted to carry out an essential task. Marvellous to behold in its intricacy is the Sock Spectrumifactor. Any ordinary chest of drawers can be placed next to the Spectrumifactor and an operative only needs to take the large suction pipe attached to the Spectrumifactor, place it in the sock drawer and throw the enormous levered switch to turn it on. Rasping, wheezing bel-lows powered by the water wheel suck the socks out of the

drawer into a rotating drum containing three handfuls of fresh grass clippings and a string of pork sausages. An often observed fact is that socks, when mixed with grass clippings and pork sausages, have a rotational resonant frequency which is proportional to the frequency of their light absorption. Voicing this more clearly: socks of the same colour will start to vibrate when the spinning barrel reaches a certain speed. Ingeniously wrought cam wheels shake the spinning barrel at the same rate as the resonating socks inside and this causes them to rise to the top of the barrel where a rotating fishing net captures them and tips them onto a conveyor belt. Next, a series of automated hands on sticks carefully press and fold them. Gradually the spinning barrel increases in speed, meaning that first of all the red socks emerge, followed by orange, yellow, green and so on through the rainbow until the violet socks emerge. (Miraculous though the Spectrumifactor is, it is not so discriminating as to redirect anything as tasteless as violet socks into the nearest dustbin. Advanced questions of sartorial propriety are beyond its remit.) At the end of this process the folded socks are then returned to the drawer, perfectly ordered according the colours of the rainbow. Delightfully, this whole charming procedure only takes eight days to complete. Admittedly the Spectrumifactor explodes if socks containing man made fibres are sucked from the drawers. Man made fibres react violently when brought into contact with rotating pork sausages.

Moving on, in the room next to the Spectrumifactor is the Luminesaphon, a complex series of pipes and ducts which form a thermostatic feedback system which will heat wallpaper paste to the exact temperature needed for it to begin to luminesce the blue green colour of mould on limes. Kept at this critical temperature for five weeks the wallpaper paste enters into a self sustaining chain reaction phase which lasts several years and means that it will continue to emit its blue green light until it is entirely converted into a grey grit which makes a perfectly balanced parakeet food. Every room

in the mill is lit by this refreshing and invigorating light, and the trees around the millpond play host to many colonies of very contented parakeets.

Next is the Riddle-Me-Really, superb in its construction, baffling in its complexity, yet astounding in its elegant simplicity. Nine feet tall it stands in the form of a Native American totem pole, a collection of carved animal heads with life-like glass eyes piled on top of each other with mind-bogglingly complex machinery meshing and turning within. You simply need to write down a riddle, any riddle, on a piece of paper that has been soaked in the juice from crushed piano stools, in ink distilled from the darkneses behind sofas, by the light of burning enmities, and place that paper along with a paperback copy of Lord Baden Powell's *Scouting for Boys* in the beak of the eagle's head atop the Riddle-Me-Really. Instantly, triggered by the weight of improving literature, the beak will snap closed on the book and riddle and the fully automatic process of answering the riddle will commence. The paper that the riddle is written on is first sliced into ribbons such that each line of the riddle occurs on one ribbon. *Scouting for Boys* is clamped along its spine and an Action Man's hand attached to a piston flips through its pages, causing the gentle breeze of Endurance and Chivalry to fan from the pages and reorder the ribboned lines of riddle according to their good temper and cheeriness. Afterwards the ribbons are progressed by turning gears down through each head in the totem pole. Making their way through first of all the carved wolf's head, or Amorok of Inuit legend from whom nothing is concealed, the ribbons are weighed according to their strength, and if they are weighed to be particularly strong or weak, then grey pebbles with intricately carved marks representing fortitude (or its absence) inscribed on them are released to be caught in the blow hole of the killer whale's head which is at the bottom of the pole. Into the head of Tuluqaq the trickster raven pass the ribbons, and Amorok's eyes light up with the colour of grey moonlight reflected off razor

sharp teeth to show that the ribbons have passed the judgement of the wolf. So down pass the ribbons through the heads where they are weighed against the characteristics of the mythical animal the heads represent, each time curiously inscribed grey pebbles being dropped into the blow hole of the whale if the ribbons meet the required measurements. Proud and tricky is Tulugaq the raven, and the ribbons are weighed for their capriciousness, and then Tulugaq's eyes light up the blue of sunlight refracted through the edge of a black feather. Riches and abundance are represented by naaraajiiq the frog, and it weighs the ribbons for their generosity and naaraajiiq's eyes then light up the yellow of gold given in charity. Intelligence and power are the characteristics of Wakinyan the mighty thunderbird whose eyes light up the white of lightning. Nerve and determination are the characteristics of the salmon, whose eyes light up the red of blood charged with enthusiasm. Greed and tempestuous selfishness are the characteristics of Lucifee the wildcat, whose eyes turn poisonous green when it has finished weighing the ribbons. In the head of the killer whale the grey pebbles are mixed and sorted, then covered in ink and rolled onto a sheet of white paper, and as they do so they will impress on the paper the answer to the riddle that was first placed in the beak of the eagle. This answer is then fed out of the killer whale's mouth, whose eyes turn the dark emerald of a ray of sunlight seen in the deep ocean to show that the whole process is complete. Strangely, the answer that the Riddle-Me-Really gives to all riddles is 'If you answer this riddle you'll never begin', but this may just be because no-one has ever yet given it a clever enough riddle to answer.

Humming away in the next room is the Odour-ostracisemeter, a tangle of pipes and pumps which extracts bad smells from the bottom of fridges, combines them with the smells it extracts from wet dogs and bubbles the resulting gas through minty fresh mouthwash. Once the resulting liquid is

spread on roses it acts as a powerful and organic insecticide, as it causes greenfly to die of pure happiness.

Underneath the mill two enormous grinding stones relentlessly rotate against each other with many sets of false teeth fixed into the stones to enhance the grinding action. Large crates of soup dishes and dustbin lids stand next to a trapdoor above the rotating wheels and every second Sunday a new soup dish and dustbin lid is added to the grinder, to be remorselessly ground down until they eventually metamorphose into synthetic cake crumbs, indistinguishable in every respect from the real thing, apart from being magnetic and therefore always pointing north.

Drawing its power from one of the very rapidly spinning spars is a beautifully wrought automaton, which unlike the other machinery in the mill serves no practical purpose. Built many years ago by a master horologist as a gift for a beautiful but bored empress, it was discovered by the mill owners gradually falling to bits in the jams and chocolate spreads aisle of a local supermarket. Eagerly they bought it off the store owners and brought it back to the mill to restore it to its former glory. Realistic, even to the most jaded, cynical eye, it is a fully working model depicting the very moment that Jean Paul Satre realised that life is essentially meaningless and absurd. After several hours of being completely motionless sitting in a comfortable chair, a delicate intermeshing of gears inside the automaton causes a look of weary resignation to enter the uncannily lifelike eyes of the manikin.

Very many other machines crowd the rooms and out-houses of the mill, too many, too varied and of too subtle operation to list here. If the reader is interested in a fully illustrated catalogue they should send a stamped addressed envelope to an address which Richard and I will read out, but far too quickly and incoherently for you to write down.

NOW IT IS A WARM AUGUST evening and Richard and I are sitting outside The Golden Lion on the picnic benches in the

car park, pints in hand. Gnostically, Richard looks at the sky and takes in a sharp snook of air.

‘Meet the new season.’ he says. ‘Autumn has begun, I’ve just smelt it.’

Determined not to be outdone, but thinking that he’s talking some old hippy rubbish again I smell the air too and surprise myself by detecting in it something infinitesimally fresher and sharper. My mind is captured by the ambiguity and potential all over again, just from that tiny change in the air. Autumn has indeed begun.

NOW OUR GREENWOOD BURSTS into colours as varied, warm and vivid as flames. The holloways swirl and dance with squalls of falling leaves that drift in knee deep pools, just asking to be leapt in and kicked about. Orange skinned apples ripen, along with pears and dark, glistening blackberries, and we harvest what we can, wrapping some of the apples in newspaper and storing them in wooden crates. Other apples we slice and dry in the remaining warmth of the lowering sun. Yet others are mashed, then pressed, releasing their golden juices to be fermented slowly through the winter months into a cider with a rich and subtle slew of flavours. Elderberries hang in dark bitter plates where earlier their flowers had peppered the spring air with lemonade pollen, we collect them and reduce them to jams along with the herbs and wild garlic roots that we find in the dells and at the edge of the holloways. Soon the explosion of fruit and abundance is over and the empty trees form swaying filigree latices against the paling cloud streaked skies. Instatic once more, we wrap ourselves up in woolly hats and jumpers, and wind our way aimlessly through the trees collecting beautifully polished conkers and impossibly delicate leaf skeletons, watching the pale blue grey sunlight sinking into the indistinct horizon as cold incisive winds take control of the evening and chase us home to candle lit windows and slow burning wood fires. Thoughts turn to nesting, to well stocked larders, to the smell

of cinnamon spiced cakes cooking for hours until they turn syrupy brown, to plays on the radio, to ghost stories read from heavy bound books, to jigsaws on tables next to windows streaked with lashing rain.

HANGING BELOW THE AIRSHIP we've built out of willow wands and stitched together canvas spice sacks is a long boat shaped basket that Richard and I stand in. Out of the front leans Richard peering into a badly bent and cracked brass telescope, which serves no navigational purpose, as instead of a lens at the end there is a collodion photograph of a young Margaret Rutherford conducting healthy exercises that he likes to examine in considerable detail. Up at the back of the basket I sit in a wing backed armchair with divers charts, maps and arcane navigational instruments spread over the dark mahogany desk in front of me. Grandiloquently dressed for our great voyage, Richard wears an admiral's hat with gold thread trimmings and a fake red peony flower made out of badly origamied paper napkins. He also wears a long dark blue overcoat, several sizes too big, with shoulder epaulets made from upturned scrubbing brushes. Trimming the coat are a multitude of brightly coloured badges, mostly made from Lyle's Golden Syrup lids and pilchard tins. I wear a dark tweed suit, mortar board and gown, stained by a variety of exploding fountain pens, worn through at the elbows and generally ripped, singed and burnt by untold dangerous chemical experiments.

The autumn wind catches the tea-towel sails that are tied with green garden string to the airship and we begin to gain height. We cast the empty cooking sherry bottles we are using as ballast over the side and we take to the air, rising above the trees and heading out towards the coast. Ahead is the green sea and a multitude of unexplored lands beyond.

'Straight ahead, Professor B!' cries Richard, pointing his telescope to the far horizon.

‘A touch more fuel in the furnace perhaps, Lord T?’ I cry, and Richard dutifully flips a few logs into the wrought iron wood burner that powers the steam driven rotating sails at the back of the airship. Billows of smoke and steam puff lazily into the air around us, leaving a vaporous trail behind us which is caught by the sun and coloured a bold bright orange. I adjust the pegged out bedsheet that serves as a rudder according to the calculations I have made with compass, set square and slide rule on the maps laid out in front of me. Travelling with the wind we are happy that wherever we are going, we will get there eventually and we open the well stocked drinks cabinet and pour ourselves a few stalwart measures of plum brandy then climb into the large leather sofa suspended by ropes from the front of the airship which serves as the viewing platform.

‘Bottoms up!’ declares Richard and we both drain our cut crystal glasses then settle down to watch the wild and exotic, the far and the strange, the distant and inexplicable lands drift below us as we are carried onwards to our final destination. Over dark jagged mountains we sail, topped by ancient castles built by giants. Lands covered by impenetrable jungles filled with narcotic flowers, the very scent of which drive sane men to dreams of exquisite madness drift below us. Dipping low our airship travels fast along a great lake just a few feet from the surface, and myriads of shimmering dragonflies soar along side us, flitting in and out between the ropes that suspend our basket, catching the sun in a never ending swirl of reflected colour. At the head of the lake we catch a thermal air current and circle gracefully up into the sky. Higher and higher we go leaving the world far below until it becomes a tiny toy globe suspended in the sparkling blackness of space. Around us swoop strange creatures with great expanses of wing, slowly pushing the thin air behind them as they glide and roll around one another in a ponderous, slow, stately and magnificently elegant dance.

KING OF
THE WOODS

'Now have we got to where we want to go to?' I ask Richard.

'Don't think so.' he replies, pouring himself another plum brandy and topping my glass up too. 'Better things than this that we haven't seen yet.'

'Are there?' I ask, and he thinks about it for a while and then nods authoritatively.

'Going to come and see?' he asks.

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