

CHAPTER I

The Garden of Earthly Delights

AUTUMN NIGHTS ARE SUFFUSED with potential, of things that might happen. Summer fills everything with light, all is clear and visible. The summertime has limits and edges. In autumn the edges disappear and become shadowed hinterlands where all sorts of unmentionable things might be going on. Autumn is a borderland between the glare of the summer and the claustrophobic closing in of winter, the time in which we close ourselves off with walls and curtained windows from the dead frozen world, and live in the story haunted worlds of our imaginations, untouched by the dissolving reality of daylight. I've always loved autumn. Things start in autumn, a big chunk of my life has been spent studying and working in universities and as the September evenings start getting darker, the potential starts. New people to meet, new bedsits to move in to, new things to learn, new courses to teach. This is the autumn of 1984, I've just left school and this will be the first of those autumns filled with possibility. This my canonical autumn. When I think of autumn in general, this is the particular autumn I envisage. The smell of woodsmoke, or, increasingly rare these days, the smell of cigarette smoke return me to this autumn. This is the autumn I get to visit Richard's realm, a hand built world capturing that essence of autumn, a physical skin around a complex teenaged society, a dark smoky space hidden in a suburban garden.

A car pulls up outside an ordinary looking detached house on a secluded back street. A train is heard rhythmically clattering over the railway bridge that crosses the main road a few hundred yards away. I get out of the car, inform my mum of the time she should expect me home and then feel

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the darkness and the sky form a claustrophobic enclave around me. It is a cold autumnal night and there are low heavy clouds lit acid amber by suburban sodium streetlights. A slow wind pushes the underbelly of the clouds in a rolling slow motion and spits out an annoying rain which seems more intent on just being irritating rather than actually getting anything or anyone wet. I could look around me or upwards, but it somehow doesn't feel appropriate. I just follow a tunnel visioned route from the car to the front door taking in very little around me. The front door is set back inside a porch fronted by a red brick arch which creates even more of a sense of a tunnel. I ring on the doorbell and after a few moments of audible shuffling and door banging inside, the door opens just wide enough to let me in. A heavy curtain inside covers the front door and as soon as I'm in the hallway the door is shut and the curtain is rattled back into place. The bright lights inside render me mostly snow blind, but the kindly faced lady who opened the door greets me and ushers me past the backroom door that had been hastily closed when I rang the doorbell. The enormous bristling German Shepherd dog that had been marshalled into the backroom senses that a stranger has entered and its canine instinct informs it that I, like all visitors, am a potential mass murderer. It roars in indignation and does its best to smash the restraining door down with the sole intention of sinking its wide selection of glistening teeth into a wide selection of my body parts. In amongst the ear splitting barks there is a tirade of swearwords as the dog's owner, in the back room with it, tries to calm it down and stop it demolishing the fixtures and fittings. I'm whooshed past the even brighter kitchen, into a back passage. A few pleasantries are exchanged with the kindly faced lady, but because she's an adult and I'm a sixteen year old boy, my answers are excruciatingly embarrassed monosyllables. Out of the back passage, through the back door and I'm on my own in the pitch black garden.

Up to this point, this could have been any visit to any one of my school friends' houses.

But from now on it gets different. I've taken the first step from normal suburban house into Richard's enchanted realm. I can smell the wood smoke characteristic of Richard's realm and I know that I'm just a few steps away from that dark, unpredictable fairyland.

I turn left along the patio, slightly illuminated by light escaping the curtains of the back room. The barking and swearing is dying down and muffled now. The not-quite silence of suburbia descends. On the edge of perception but not of consciousness, there is a perpetual murmur of distant sound, cars accelerating, echoing dog barks, the far distant rumbling whine of an aeroplane, another diminishing clatter from the railway as a train pulls away, following its meandering line through the town, out into the countryside to a remote city. Such a near silence is more isolating than pure silence itself, the near silence lets you know that somewhere, something is going on just not anywhere near you. On my right there is a drop to the back lawn, but a curtain of night blackness screens out any perception I might have of that part of the garden. The annoying rain flies out of the darkness at me. It is cold and the wind is only marginally slowed down by the several layers of clothing I have on.

At the end of the patio a little path leads off down into an overgrown archipelago of garden. There are trees and shrubs either side, only really perceptible because of the way they muffle the near silence and the sound of my footsteps as I gingerly progress along the path. There are steps down cunningly hidden in the path, completely invisible in the darkness. Several times in the past month I have made confident bold steps into the unknown along this path, only for my feet to find air where there should be earth, and I've gone windmilling off into the forbidden borders, instinctively trying to find a tree to grab onto to correct my balance. This time I judge the steps down correctly, and I feel a little note

of pleasure as this signals that I'm becoming a native to Richard's realm, not a tourist. The surrounding shrubs form another tunnel that pushes me on, past a garden shed and then into a little clearing. The space is overhung by trees and screened off by a fence and gate which marks the garden's outer limit. On the other side of the fence a streetlamp leaks its artificial orange light through the gaps in the fence, and plays distorted shadow puppets through the gently screening trees. Later that year it will snow and then this part of the garden only requires the addition of Tumnus the Faun to completely bring that vividly imagined scene from my childhood into solid materiality.

To the right of the clearing is a ramshackle wall made of sheets of wood, old doors and sundry other reused carpentry. The wall is about four feet high and above it a felted roof sweeps back into the darkness. The streetlight shadows hide the features of the wall rather than illuminate them. Amber patterns form and disintegrate on the wall and slide onto the ground in the clearing. A cloud of powerfully fragrant woodsmoke rolls down the felted roof, thins out and whips away into the blackness of the rest of the garden. Voices can be heard from the other side of the ramshackle wall. This clearing is the last pool of normality, the point at which you step off the real world and into somewhere altogether different. In the middle of the wall is a tiny slit of a door, hung about with some heavy draped material, indistinct in the darkness. There is no elegant way of traversing this door from the real world into Richard's realm. I lean down to a crouch, push the material out of the way, put my head in the gap and then have to swing my shoulders until they are vertical so that they can follow my head, and then in a strange crouching shuffle, hop forward into the space beyond. The material over the door swings behind me, and the real world ceases to be.

The bitter amber of the streetlight is replaced by a richer, living pattern of moving oranges and reds. These moving pat-

terns are not created by shadows that obscure the light source like the streetlight outside, but they are the patterns created by the light itself shifting, rolling and dancing. These patterns are living, primary and not artificial. This is primal illumination from a wood fire in the corner, a form of light embedded deep in the irrational consciousness. This is a shed in a Solihull back garden, but if I was standing in Beowulf's hall as Grendel haunts the rain and ice scoured marshes outside, then I would be seeing much the same glowing and swaying radiance. Admittedly though, the room I'm in is smaller and lower than an Anglo-Saxon royal hall, and contains more spotty teenagers than are alluded to in the epic verse. There is only firelight and shadow and this captures that essential autumnal obscurity. Brought up in a typical middle class suburban household I have never come across ambiguity in my very surroundings before. Until now a room is a fixed space and contains an easily determined number of people doing equally determinate things. Now I can't, truth be told, make out who or what is in the shed, where it begins and ends. Just as the the firelight sways and shifts, the darkness flows correspondingly, filling one corner of the shed, but then receding from another to reveal faces picked out in vivid red chiaroscuro. If you dip into a shadow, of which there are many, then you can make yourself completely invisible. The only tell tale giveaway being the several red glints at the end of cigarettes which bob around in the darkness. Occasionally the owner will take a drag and for a brief moment part of their face will materialise out of the darkness by the light of the flaring tobacco tip. The air is warm and stuffy with wood and tobacco smoke. There is a working chimney above the fire and most of the smoke is drawn up and out into the night sky. This is why the door is so tiny; any bigger and there could be a reverse draw down the chimney, filling the room with choking smoke. The tiny slit of a door ensures that the only air movement is caused by the heat from the fire pushing air and smoke up and out of the chimney. This

might look like a shambolic, higgledy-piggledy of a shed, but it is not. There is design and foresight in it, because this is Richard's realm.

My entrance creates a few happy shouts of welcome. Richard himself is sitting in front of the fire, a Richard shaped silhouette edged in red, his wooly jumper and unkempt hair throwing the passing radiance from the fire off course and creating a blurry, dancing firelight aura around him.

Richard inhabits his space exactly. When applying the verb 'to be' to Richard it never needs to be qualified. Plainly stated, Richard is. The rest of us want to be, are trying to be, or rather wish we weren't. Richard is. Even saying that Richard just is, which sounds a little more natural, somehow diminishes it. Maybe it would be best to say that Richard really is, or that Richard really is just a bit more than the rest of us really are.

It's a peculiar but very definite thing. Nature has given him a certain amount of space and he has poured Richard, the whole Richard and nothing but Richard into that space. Compared to the other teenagers who have draped themselves over the fixtures and fittings or are hunched in dark corners Richard exists as a single indivisible unit of himself. The rest of us have also been granted a certain amount of space to inhabit but we splash ourselves messily around in our spaces, try just a little too hard to make ourselves the centre of the party by noisily and vivaciously overflowing, or, like me, are not quite sure of the limits of our space, what we should be pouring into it and are tenuously and embarrassedly trying to pour borrowed bits of personality into it to see what fits. Richard's solid self containment makes him the centre of attention, and this is a touch unfair on the other teenagers who try to make themselves interesting and exciting by increasingly explosive and desperate displays of ooky-kookiness. The more they do it the more it makes Richard look like the only

genuine object in the room, diminishes them and increases his mystery and allure.

I have a fancy that if you put any of the rest of us in front of the fire then the light would easily find its way through our half formed, chaotic teenaged selves, showing us as being transitory unreal creatures, whereas Richard absorbs and radiates the firelight. He, the shed and the fire are the only real things there, and he, the shed and the fire live in mutual dependence. No Richard, no shed. No shed, no fire. No fire or shed, Richard probably just becomes a confused teenager like the rest of us.

A possible reason that Richard manages to fill his space exactly is that, physically at least, nature has granted him a bit less space to fill up than the rest of us. In the ensuing twenty years I will never actually get out a tape measure and compare his statistics to those of Leonardo da Vinci's perfectly proportioned Vitruvian Man with his four arms and four legs positioned in perfect visual harmony, but even the most casual observer would note that he doesn't match up. Instead of standing in a classically proportioned square and circle, showing the human body's consistency with divinely granted mathematical law, Richard would fit better in a squashed grapefruit shape. His legs are the problem, there are simply less of them than one would expect. When asked to account for this deficiency he will put on a voice that is half Shirley Temple and half Keith Harris's Orville, smile in a parody of bovine cuteness and say 'I've only got ickle legs.'

Many years later, consumed by indignant outrage, he will wave a page of The Guardian's Soulmates Women seeking Men section in my face and demand that I agree that it expresses fascism of the most egregious nature. I can't see it. 'Look, look, look' he says. I still can't see it. 'Every one, every last one... "seeks tall man".' he fumes. I look again and it's true. Still, their loss.

Richard's stocky frame only adds to his air of solidity. Even his hair, which is an unruly tangle, is a solid unruly

tangle and has proved itself the superior to many a mere comb intent on bringing order to its chaos.

He sits in a characteristic way. He finds a low seat, usually placed an optimum distance away from a fire. It is rare to ever find Richard any significant distance from a fire. He sits with legs slightly bent out in front of him, back straight and eyes directed at the mesmerising flames. A cigarette is a permanent fixture, self rolled or some fearsomely lung ripping unfiltered brand. He inhales sharply and quickly and then releases a long blue stream of smoke low into the fire where it causes the cherry red of the burning wood to briefly sparkle white and orange, and tiny fire devils to snake crazily around the wood. The tobacco smoke then mingles with the wood smoke and is convected on its fragrant path up the chimney.

He even walks in a characteristic way. It is very precise and thought out, almost a parody of how you should walk, an animator's first attempt at getting a figure to walk based on how it says the legs and arms should move in a book. He picks out the place where his foot is going to go, puts his foot there firmly, heel then toe, but turns the foot out just a touch more than necessary. His arm swings across his chest, his hand clenched in a determined fist that signifies he's going somewhere, but again it's just a bit too thought through and overt. I never do ask him where this walk has come from, but I have a long standing suspicion that it is how Eric Morecambe walks in *The Intelligence Men* and he's copied it.

His stocky chest gives him a deep, resonant voice. Like the rest of us brought up on the outskirts of Birmingham, he has enough of a midlands accent for it to be interesting and musical, but not enough to slip into comedy Brummingam. Like everything else about him, his speaking voice is calm, firm and understated, quiet but with a river of humour running in it. My Mum is a stern critic of all accents that aren't from her native Yorkshire, and as a true daughter of Brigg-house is parsimonious with her expressions concerning The

Fragile and Exquisite. She once drove us to Stratford-upon-Avon for a picnic, and even she was taken by his soft tones. 'Eeh, that Richard.' she has repeatedly rhapsodised every time he is mentioned, 'Such a beautiful speaking voice.'

For the first time that I have been granted access to Richard's world he sits alone. For some reason his girlfriend is not there tonight. Until now she has always been a maximum of six inches away from him, zealously guarding and defending him from anything other than superficial interactions with the other occupants of the shed. Richard is hers, and we'd better not forget it. Without the protective shield of his girlfriend I get to sit next to the fire with Richard and we chat while watching the tiny wisps of flame that skit around the log in the fireplace. The wood fire isn't a short lived conflagration, it isn't piled up bits of tinder with flames and heat charging uselessly up the chimney. It is a single fat log. Richard knows how to get it to burn slowly and steadily. It is all about turning it into a solid mass of deep ruby glowing embers which steadily consume the log for hours, slowly releasing a comfortable heat. Actual flames are discouraged as they burn the wood too hot and too quickly. Showy and wasteful. Most of the rest of the people in the shed don't get this. When they light fires there is a rush of orange, crackling and spitting and it is all over in half an hour. Richard rolls his eyes, clears out the fireplace and lights a proper one. When Richard lights a fire, it is usually still going the next morning.