

CHAPTER V

A Map of the Lost then Found

FIVE YEARS HAVE PASSED since I last saw Richard and as I drive towards Solihull town centre I see the back of a familiar pedestrian, short of leg but long in memory. The Warwick Road is lined with old oak trees and Richard's form is caught in pennant like strips of June sunlight and moving shadow as he walks beneath their branches.

The person behind the steering wheel of my car feels fundamentally changed to the one who had decided it might be a good idea to remain bobbing around in Gary's wake. The box of revolting teenaged memories has been sealed up and sunk in its unmarked watery grave. My small voice has started talking to me again, and I've been listening to what it has to say.

Richard, being changeless, is still Richard, the whole Richard and nothing but Richard, but even he has reached a mutual understanding with the world around him, realising that he can get on with whatever he wants to be getting on with, and doesn't perpetually have to ask permission to do it. We are both close to stepping into a brief but vivid period that is a Garden of Eden. But just like us, though, we've got this Eden thing the wrong way round: we don't feel like we've fallen from grace, it feels like we're rising up to it. All the rubbish of being a teenager is sloughing off and just as we feel that we both have great wings emerging that can carry us wherever we want, just at that exact point for both of us, our paths cross.

Richard never did believe in coincidences.

Here is a map of how we got to this point. As a Tolkien fan I believe that all books should have a good map. This

KING OF
THE WOODS

isn't a geographic map though, it is a tracery of intermeshing paths that we have both taken over the past five years. There are a lot of places on the map marked Here Be Dragons, dark nasty places that got firmly rammed in my box of teenaged memories to be deliberately forgotten about. We won't look at them if we can help it. But we will pick out some of the more interesting paths, each taking as its starting point some hopeless teenaged confusion, fear or narcissism and finishing up with Richard and I both heading in the same direction in many more ways than geographically, along the Warwick Road on that sunny afternoon in June.

As a starting example, have a look at the car I'm driving, and trace the path of my emotional response to it over the past four years. It is an Austin Mini 850 which I bought for £50 just after I'd completely failed my A-levels and got a job as a bank clerk. It has a top speed of sixty miles an hour, but only if it were driven off a cliff. It is rotting around the wheel arches and boils over more reliably than an angry kettle. When I first bought it, and it makes its first appearance on the map, I found it to be an appalling shameful embarrassment. Everyone else in the band had whizzy hot hatches, turbo charged with sleek black and red lines. Wheels were spun and turns usually involved the handbrake. In a forlorn effort to keep up I had installed a ludicrous car stereo into my Mini which was only a little quieter than a full blown band rehearsal. Friday and Saturday evenings on Solihull High Street were often interrupted by the incongruous sights and sounds of my tiny blue blip of a car employing all thirty of its horsepower to race past the queues of people waiting to get in the pubs, windows down, idiots hanging out, air guitaring along to an excruciating blast of heavy metal coming from the Mini's rear parcel shelf.

And then something changed, and I found that I no longer found my little blue spot of a car to be a shameful stain on my machismo, but that I rather liked it. I realised that it didn't have a top speed of sixty miles an hour, it had

a top speed of pottering amiably about, and I quite liked pottering amiably about. The big ball of string that I keep on the back seat to tie bits back on that have fallen off is no longer a sign of weakness, more a sign of charming fallibility. The great eruptions of steam that periodically spray out from under the front wheel arch are no longer a sign of engine failure, they are indications that this journey is going to be a genuine adventure. Lastly, I had stopped driving this car, we just went out together, the car and I, for aimless rambles around the West Midlands highways, sometimes as far as the Cotswolds, occasionally adventures of exploration even further than that, sometimes going where I wanted, sometimes going where the car wanted, sometimes just following signposts to Warwickshire villages because we liked the sound of their names.

Let's take a quick look at the path taken by the band, and get it out of the way. This path starts off with a new band that is an infinitesimally small improvement on The Grit, and finishes in a secondhand instrument shop as I sell my keyboards with an enormous sense of relief and get a 1930s George Formby banjolele instead. There Be a lot of Dragons on this path, as we fall out with one another in pathetic hissy fit after pathetic hissy fit, sack each other and spitefully walk out to join other bands. Within a couple of years, I am still in a band, but no other members of The Grit remain.

I got new and better keyboards, learnt to play chords and also noticed that if you flatten the third note in a chord occasionally it sounds like the blues. Let's not go as far as saying I could play the blues though. I couldn't play the blues any more than I could open an umbrella and float like Mary Poppins across a foggy Edwardian London roof-scape. The more I learnt to play though, the more I realised how much I couldn't play, each new skill simply added another candle to dimly illuminate the great big caverns of musical competence that I had yet to infiltrate. Many of the other paths on the

map have gentle progressions from teenaged nonsense to that sunny afternoon, but this one has a definite turning point. It occurs in the rear circle of the Birmingham Odeon where I had gone to see Yngwie Malmsteen, who, with a name like that, can't help but being a leather trousered fretboard botherer, famous for squeezing even more minor pentatonic notes into a bar than is thought seemly by most heavy metal guitarists. The flipping point occurred after the third song when I realised that I was bored silly by all those notes, there was no music or artistry to be heard, he was simply moving his fingers incredibly fast on the top bit of his fretboard. I couldn't differentiate what he was doing from some of the secretaries in the bank's typing pool, who could do a hundred and ten words per minute. They didn't need leather trousers to do it, and let's face it, the sub-manager would have sent them home in disgrace if they had turned up wearing any.

"I can't play," I thought to myself, "and even if I could I wouldn't want to play this. I don't like heavy metal. Never have."

After years of brooding silence my small inner voice detonated back into life, bawling "I told you so!" at such a volume that thankfully it drowned out the rest of the gig. The fatuous edifice of me being a world famous keyboard player, that tower of hooting twaddle, collapsed in on itself, and within a few weeks I had informed my bandmates without rancour that they needed to replace me.

As I am pocketing a wedge of notes in a secondhand instrument shop, having sold them all my keyboards, I notice a little tear drop of an instrument, forlornly hanging behind a display of acoustic guitars.

"It's a banjolele," says the assistant, following my eye-line. "You know like George Formby, When I'm Cleanin' Windars," he sings, in dismissive explanation. The little contraption is the musical instrument equivalent of my Mini 850 and I feel an instant fellow feeling with it. I peel a few notes off the roll that the assistant has just handed me.

“How much?” I ask.

“Really?” he responds in surprise, taking in my long hair and the battery of advanced electronics I had just sold him. “Oh, take it. Nobody else is going to buy it, are they?”

Later that afternoon, furnished with a ukulele chord book that I had rescued from the completely benighted weird old book section of the library, I learn to strum a joyous D major, which resolves both that stupid E minor power chord and the huge cludge of cognitive dissonance I had been dragging about all this time. I feel like I have just taken off a pair of ill fitting shoes and gone for a barefoot walk in a warm summer meadow.

“I approve,” says my small voice.

RICHARD'S PATHS ALONG the map are more subtle. Whereas my paths show me throwing off baggage that I really ought not to have picked up in the first place, Richard's paths show him realigning himself so he can move forward in harmony with the world around him, not feeling that he is forever undermined by it. The other difference is that while I was starting to follow paths without really knowing where I was going, Richard knew exactly where he was going. He knew what Eden looked like, he had seen it.

A cold but clean winter sky is cut across by empty tree branches. The trees are dormant, their bark grey green in the weak sun. In amongst the trees, hanging on to branches or sitting in the leaf mould is a band of hippies, a vivid moment from the late sixties, distilled and crystallised in that winter wood. They are brightly coloured, robin red, velvet blacks, felt greens, stripes, whorls and screen printed flowers. The colours might be bright, but they are not discordant, they flow in and out of the trees and resolve with the rotting leaves. They are not artificial colours, not acid or chemical, but the colours you get from boiling dried madder roots or crushing the flowers of dyers' chamomile. There are scruffy floppy hats, shawls and scarves – one lad looks like his top is made out of

a window cleaner's chamois leathers – but there are aesthetics and decisions made, this isn't just random dressing up box playtime, nor are they a bunch of lazy hippies who have been dragged backwards through a charity shop. They are accessorised by curiously symbolic necklaces and exotic feathers. About half are children, the rest adults and a patched dog alert with sharp canine intelligence. Most look to camera, each face hung with the question of why you would want to remain in your drab world of reality, when you could join them in this rural arcadia. A girl grins toothily, and the centrally seated figure pierces the scene with an ice-blue stare, waving a decorated pipe, looking as if he is about to weave mysterious elemental magics. The woman holding the dog smiles, her young face touched with an ancient serenity which has been taught to her by the very trees themselves.

It is the cover of *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter* by The Incredible String Band which Richard has just picked out from one of the racks in Solihull's DiscoVery record shop. He has looked at it and realised that his life would never be quite the same again. This band of hippies is what he thinks The Dick Club should have been, if only it wasn't undermined by idiots air guitaring and putting newspaper on the fire. The girl behind the counter looks bewildered, as when she had last looked up there was just a solitary short figure browsing the racks, but now he is staring mesmerised by some daft old hippy album, and her shop has somehow become full of buzzing dragonflies. After she has opened the shop door and wafed them all out, she returns to the counter and sells Richard his copy of *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*, changing his life forever.

On getting the album home and on his record player it is a bit of a disappointment initially. It doesn't sound like the gently inviting coven of rural witches on the cover. It does sound like a coven of witches put in a big sack with two dozen weird ethno-instruments, a bit of Celtic mysticism, Eastern esotericism, New Age spirituality, child-like rhymes,

and then the whole bag shaken around in a surprising time signature. It is a bewildering rabble of an album; just as soon as Richard thinks he has got hold of recognisable musical narrative, it will usually be quickly spun out of his grasp and replaced by something bizarre bashed out on a sitar or kazoo. Richard perseveres though and rapidly realises that the ice-blue eyed shaman on the cover is a fellow spirit, weaving his mysterious elemental magic with childlike simplicity, clever wordplay and multi-syllable rhymes. The first song sets a native poem describing a child's eye view of a big but essentially friendly adult world, and this illuminates one of Richard's defining paths on our map.

We have to look at the map at one of its remotest points, way back on the time axis, to the wretched day that both of us were stuffed into ill-fitting, itchy uniforms, pushed out of our front doors and left to make our ways to bus stops, and then on to the bleak authoritarian fortress that was our senior school. Junior school had been a female place for Richard, warm, forgiving, supportive and just round the corner. Our senior school, on the other hand, was male, spiteful, bullying, nasty and miles away. The main lesson in life that it offered us was that we should shut up and do as we were told. That first morning we are lined up in our classes in the playground, then organised into single files in alphabetical order, and marched off to assembly. In Richard's line there is a momentary mix up and it becomes apparent to the teacher in charge that somehow the surnames beginning with G have got ahead of those beginning with F. The teacher reacts with indignant fury to this wild insubordination, and shouts at the whole line as if it is composed of those with mental deficiencies from the Alsops all the way back to the Yellands. Richard realises that the world isn't quite the welcoming place he had thought it was up to this point, and it will take several years of careful navigation to bring his paths round to accommodate this realisation. As the weeks pass the more entrepreneurial kids realise that bullying isn't just the pre-

serve of the teachers, and that they they are expected to get in on the act too. Years of physical abuse and psychological humiliation follow. Richard arrives home and has to have the spit that has been rubbed into his hair washed out. School isn't quite the spiritual catastrophe for me that it is for Richard. Richard is an only child, but I'm the youngest of three brothers, so I'd already got the idea that world might not be a welcoming place, and usually would come home to get more spit added, rather than washed out.

That song on *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter* which speaks of a little boy sitting on a garden wall, watching adults go by who return friendly smiles, speaks directly to Richard of the time before that crisis of senior school. The words lie warm and protected in his soul, like cubs in a den asleep with their vixen.

Richard sets about recreating the cover of *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter* with himself as the enigmatic wizard at the centre. The Dick Club is his starting point, and now that it has been freed of Judas Priest fans he uses his charisma to assemble a rag tag of local dreadlocked weirdos, teenagers determined to drop out of whatever life looks as if it might drop them in to, and a pick'n'mix selection of dope smokers. Richard, of course, will assume his natural place in the middle and everyone else will arrange themselves around him.

Richard has several goes at this, and this path is strewn with as many Dragons, arguments, fall outs and petty bickerings as my path as a musician is, and is also best left mostly undocumented. The fundamental problem he finds is that once you put together a load of people who define themselves by their non-conformity, then each one of them expects everyone else to conform to their personal non-conformity. Everyone wants to be the enigmatic wizard in the centre with the obscurely decorated pipe. Confusion, self righteous arguments and recrimination rapidly ensue.

Somewhere in the Wiltshire countryside an enormous tank of a Land Rover has come to a juddering halt while

Richard and Red Leb discuss the directions to Glastonbury festival.

“No, man look, we need to go down the A39 to join up with the Gaia Mother convoy. I bought some shit off them last year, and oh man, it was like my eyes were full of rainbow comets.”

Happy though he would be scoring some pot that would fill his eyes with rainbow comets, Richard doesn't want to join the Gaia Mother convoy, he wants to go via Long Drove, a road so insignificant it doesn't even warrant a B-number, because it travels along the Winged White Horse ley line.

“What's the Winged White Horse ley line, man?” asks Red Leb. “Like it sounds crazy and great and everything, but we've got a festival to be getting to, and this bong isn't going to fill itself.”

The Winged White Horse ley line isn't an alignment known to the ancients, it is one that Richard and his girlfriend Cheeba had made up a couple of weeks earlier after reading a book on the subject, getting an OS map of Wiltshire out of the library and plotting its route with a pencil and shatterproof ruler. Cheeba has drawn out the route on some red sugar paper and decorated it with pictures of angels and obscure looking pictographs.

“Leb, give it a rest, man,” calls a female voice from the back of the Land Rover. “Life isn't purely about procuring pot for you.” The voice turns its attention to Richard. “Richard, I've discussed it with Cheeba, and we've decided that instead of following your ley line thing we should head to Upper Godney. There's a women's collective meeting there. I've talked with them before and they completely changed the way I conceptualise my own uterus, made me see it as a political object in a patriarchal society. And I think we would all benefit from being introduced to that sort of thinking.”

“Ah, Indica, man!” complains Red Leb.

“Shut up, Leb,” says Indica, “don't you dare start oppressing me.”

"It's all getting a bit heavy," says Leb, worriedly. "You know what happens when it gets heavy, I start getting paranoia flashbacks. Oh my god, man, those cows have all started staring at us."

"You really think we're all that stupid, Leb? You always start getting paranoia flashbacks whenever you don't get your own way."

"Yeah, and you always start accusing the patriarchy of oppressing you whenever you don't get yours," counters Red Leb, suddenly no longer suffering from his paranoia flashback.

"Cheeba, what do you think? Do you really want to go to the women's collective meeting?" asks Richard, as usual cutting through the increasingly strident din with the compulsion of his beautiful voice. Cheeba, a tiny elf child with a face specially painted for the occasion and mass of strawberry blond hair, looks regretfully at her sugar paper map. As each point on it has been reached she has marked it off by colouring it in the same colour as her aura at that time. "If Indica wants to go to the women's camp, I suppose we should," she says in a voice like dandelion seeds calling to a cloud.

"Right. Women's collective it is, then," says Richard pointedly and starts the involved process of getting the Land Rover going again. After repeatedly stamping on the accelerator and then clutch he gets it into gear, and it starts to drift like a continent towards Upper Godney and a more politically aware conception of Indica's uterus.

Being the owner of a Mini 850 I am clearly not one to cast aspersions, but Richard's Land Rover has a top speed of forty miles an hour, but also only if driven off the edge of a cliff. That said if you did drive Richard's Land Rover off a cliff, unlike my Mini, it would not only survive, but be pretty much capable of being driven back up the cliff afterwards.

As an informative exercise the reader is invited to compare and contrast this portion of Richard's path to the parallel path that I am taking in my Mini, stereo blasting out The

Tygers of Pan Tang, following Gary to Monsters of Rock Festival at Castle Donington race course. It is a blisteringly hot day, without a cloud, but it rains at Donington. This rain doesn't fall from clouds, it falls from the two litre plastic beer bottles that borderline psychopathic bikers fill up with urine and hurl, open, in great parabolas of piss above the heads of the crowds.

Once the day's proceedings are over Gary has a particularly bad case of sunstroke and feels too unwell to drive all the way home. He drives onto a country road, parks up next to the gated entrance to a field and sleeps on his own back-seat. The first thing next morning a British Telecom van arrives, the engineer having been given the job of tightening up or replacing the telephone line that runs across the field. It had long ago been reported as being over-stretched. Finding his way blocked the engineer can't be bothered with the fuss of waking up the sleeping form in the car, and simply marks the job on his clipboard as done and drives off, leaving the offending line dangling in the wind.

Each year the Land Rover rumbles off to Glastonbury along Richard's ley lines and to the even further distant, and now completely forgotten, Elephant Fayre. The Land Rover contains a bunch of misfits who each year are less overtly weird, but who more and more don't conform to any norms other than the norms that they quite like. After a while this evolving social group learns to happily respect everyone else's eccentricities as being just as interesting or important as their own, and Richard's path finally finds its alignment. It points to a group of people who might not look like the cover of *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*, but who think and believe in the way that Richard thinks those hippies on the cover do.

As he walks along the Warwick Road under the oaks, my Mini approaching behind, he is heading for The Golden Lion, the pub in Solihull town centre where this motley band of free thinkers holds court. He is taking a few days out from his job as a gardener and tree surgeon. He had joined the

council's parks and gardens section when he left school, but they had just implemented a new, and at the time radical, experiment in outsourcing, by sacking all their employees and buying their services back in as freelancers. He is doing quite well at being self employed; it certainly supplies enough money for him to afford to tip the vast quantities of petrol into his Land Rover that it requires. It also allows him to fill up the Land Rover with tools, go and meddle in other people's gardens, and harvest wood from them, which suits him just fine.

If Richard's career is a characteristic straight line, but mine has been chopping and changing quite vigorously. It is a dark night in central Leeds and a wild and unrestrained horde of youths roam a mostly derelict terraced street. The sense of revelry is palpable, there is cheering, happy shrieks and singing. Almost everyone has got themselves a four pack of beer, quickly drunk the first one and are now using the vacated plastic ring as a convenient handle to carry the remaining three. These happy groups of beer cans are waved at each other, and at times of uncontrolled benevolence are swapped or even freely donated to others who don't have any. Five of the student houses down this road have declared this evening to be their open house party night, and almost the entire student population have arrived and are swilling up and down the road, in and out of the houses which are lit up like toy shops at Christmas. I am visiting a friend from sixth form, and am caught up in this beer soaked Wild Hunt. The group I am with flows into the first house. The Sisters of Mercy provide an insistent rhythm from a ghetto blaster at the top of the stairs. All the lights are hung about with coloured scarves, creating a dim bordello obscurity and pungent clouds of various smokes form glowing blue hazes. We bundle into the front room, and I am surprised to find that there are a couple dancing on the big marble mantelpiece above the boarded up fireplace. Their hands are above their heads, firmly pushed onto the ceiling to create enough tension to

stop them falling off. For a dangerous couple of seconds they both detach a hand each to wave at us as we roll onto their shores, and then quickly push their hands back again to continue dancing.

“Hi!” bellows a friendly voice in my ear. I smile in greeting to this complete stranger. We exchange beer cans from our respective dangling collections, thereby entwining our souls forever.

“Not seen you around,” he screeches. “What course are you doing?”

“Not doing a course,” I respond, almost exploding my lungs with the effort. “I’m visiting Jane. I’m from her home town.”

“Hi Jane!” he roars at her form in the darkness. She waves a cheerful beer can in reply. “I’ll be the Queen then,” he shouts as he turns his attention back to me, “and whort doo yoo doo?”

“I’m a bank clerk.”

“Really? You don’t look like one. Well, never mind,” he hollers in kindly sympathy, “someone has to be.”

There are cheers of encouragement as someone else manages to scramble onto the mantelpiece and join in the dancing.

The weekend afterwards the Mini and I have stopped on a tiny country lane, so disused that grass grows in a line down the middle. We have found a gated entrance to a field, and the Mini agrees to wait there for a while as I go for a walk. The field is a gentle hillock and an acre or so of trees grow in the centre. I walk up to the trees and lie down in the grass on their edge and stare at the sky. I had left home and Solihull a few months earlier, getting myself a nice little bedsit in Leamington Spa with a nice little cat, and spend most of my weekends on aimless rambles either by car or bicycle in the surrounding villages.

Fresh from its triumph in getting me to leave the band, my small voice is getting to work on my career.

“There was nobody dancing on the mantelpieces at work this week, was there?” it reminds me pointedly.

“No,” I concede sleepily.

“Not likely to ever be any either, are there?”

“Probably not.” A fat bee meanders across the blue dome above me. “So what are you telling me to do now?” I ask of my small voice.

“Me?” it replies, shocked. “I never tell you to do anything, you know that. Merely giving you food for thought.”

A week later I am bewildered to find that Coventry Poly has accepted me on their Computing Diploma course with a full grant, augmented with a mature student supplement, and that I have handed in my notice at the bank.

A year later than that, I am further bewildered to realise that something pretty profound had happened to me in the few years since completely failing all my A-levels, as I had entirely whitewashed the first year of the Diploma and got distinctions in all the modules. Maybe I had grown some useful new neurones in that time; more likely I just had grown up a bit. Whatever it was, though, I found I could just bulldoze my way through the course, succeeding at everything. I loved every minute of it, the work as much as the parties in the student houses up and down the Foleshill Road where I played The Wonderstuff songs on my banjo/lele to wild acclaim.

“Hm,” says my personal tutor in his office, looking at the computer printout of my results, while I sit on the other side of his desk, “you’re too good for this Diploma. You should apply to do a degree at a university.”