

CHAPTER V

Thieves in the Night

FIRES NEED FUEL and a few days later a renegade bunch of teenagers have left the sanctuary of The Bung in order to forage for firewood. They know a limitless, but rather dubious source. Two or three streets away there is a part brook, part canal which has been channeled between perfectly straight concrete banks so that its route can be artificially directed through the sprawl of suburban housing. Between the brook and the back gardens that approach it is a scrubby bank lined with wild ash and horse chestnut trees, knitted with brambles and threaded by a muddy path, mostly used in daylight by dog walkers.

There is a gap in a wall where the street bridges over the brook and one by one the teenagers disappear through the gap and slip, slide and gallop down the bank to the path. One of them carries a great rusty bow saw over his shoulder. Once onto the path they relax, spread out and light cigarettes, red points in the gloom. The teenager with the bow saw is on the move though, he has scented a tree further along the river which is perfect for harvesting, so the cigarettes are flicked into the stream and a line of dark, secretive forms set off after him. We soon leave the path and scramble back up the bank, disappearing into the complex tangle of trees cut through with ribbons of small paths. It is not clear that these are paths, or whether they are simply gaps in the undergrowth. If they are paths it is not clear what feet would make them. We finally reach the top of the bank and from there can see god-like down into gardens and houses. Occasionally the windows are uncurtained and the occupants can be seen within lit by flickering televisions, unaware of the

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desperate band of tree thieves who snake round in the undergrowth at the end of their gardens.

From this viewpoint I feel wholly divorced from reality. My reality until a few months ago is there in the lines of neatly tended gardens and suburban houses silhouetted by the mustard streetlights on their other side. Just visible, lit indirectly by the orange light reflected from the clouds is all the detritus of middle class gardens: swings, sheds, ponds, neatly edged flower beds, skeletal metal greenhouses. All this seems empty to me now. It is not just the late autumn emptying of the trees, turning comforting leafy soft edges into blackened witch's hands. Nor is it just the monochrome orange light that hollows out and flattens the gardens, turning them into parodies of themselves. They are gardens like the places that I used to play in, but this childish play holds no meaning or pleasure for me now. I am caught up in the desire to grow up, to be seen to be grown up, confused and excited by the several different options of grown up-ness being offered by The Dick Club and The Grit. To my left is my suburban childhood, to my right a much richer, darker and inviting reality is opening.

Richard is closing in on his prey, and with a rare display of self determination I break ranks with the others and join Richard in the main business of the evening.

"Which tree are we going to cut down, then?" I ask, thinking that the use of 'we' is rather daring. I feel rather than see an appraising stare from the Richard-shaped shade of darkness among the other darkneses.

It is a small patch of darkness. For all Richard's ability to fill a space with his personality, he can't fill much space with his physical form because there isn't much of it. In the ensuing twenty years I never will get out a tape measure and compare his statistics to that of Leonardo da Vinci's perfectly proportioned Vitruvian Man with his four arms and four legs positioned in a classically correlated circle and square, showing the human body's consistency with divinely granted

mathematical laws. Even the most casual observer will notice that Richard's form doesn't match up. Instead of a circle and square Richard would fit better in a sort of squashed grapefruit shape. His legs are the problem; there is simply less of them than one would normally expect. When asked to account for this deficiency he will put on a voice that is half Shirley Temple, 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 with him 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 says... 'seeks tall man'." I look again and it's true. Still, their loss.

After a few moments of appraising me the small patch of darkness apparently decides that I can be included in 'we' and the inner truths of tree harvesting can be revealed to a novice such as myself.

"It's got to be small enough that we can carry it, but big enough to be worth the bother," says Richard. Ruth spots an unsanctioned interaction and detaches herself from the ensemble to intervene.

"How much further have we got to go, Rich? I'm not wearing the right shoes for this."

A roll of eyes is sensed in the darkness.

"We've gone as far as we're going I think, but you head back if you want," he suggests, invoking the nuclear option. "We'll meet you back at the road."

"No, no, it's fine," she responds, horrified at the prospect of being voluntarily separated from him, and returns grumpily to the milling crowd. Richard returns his attention to me.

"It needs to be the right place on the bank," he continues. "Can't be in sight of the houses. Can't be too close to the water otherwise it might fall in."

"Might fall in the water?" I ask.

In unison we do one of *The Goon Show's* catchphrases: "He's fallen in the waaaa-ter."

His face is suddenly illuminated as he lights another cigarette and his eyes sparkle red and excited in the dark.

"These ones are possible," he says, waving at a mostly invisible thicket a few feet below us, "but they're a bit close together. They'll all hold each other up. Cut down one and it won't fall unless we cut the branches off the others."

He passes me his cigarette to me so I can light mine from his, and I feel that I've just been promoted to the captain's table.

He moves off down the bank and stops next to a tree at the edge of the thicket, looking it up and down.

"This one? What do you think?" he asks.

"No idea." I shrug. "You're the expert."

Again I'm being appraised in the darkness. This, as Richard will relate to me in later years, is the point at which Richard decides that I am not only a fully worthy member of The Dick Club, but that I am a cut above the rest. All the others would have tried to curry favour by trying to sound the expert, by putting on a serious face and saying "oh yes, I think so" or "oh no, this one don't you think?" Only I had the courage to admit that I didn't know. It is, as I look back on it, one of the first utterances from my gradually forming scientist's brain. Scientists know that saying 'no idea' is nothing to be ashamed of, in fact it means the beginning of something exciting, because there must be new things to be discovered and learnt.

"I think it'll do," he says.

Brian and a couple of the others are called, the bow saw is unshipped, the woebegone tree is circled a few times, its weight, angle and the position of its branches are judged, and then Richard is engaged in unequal battle. A few strokes of the saw and the tree is down. It never stood a chance. As it falls a cloud of black moths fly from the tree and refill the space it had occupied. For a few long seconds the swirling

dusty cloud, black like powder paint in amongst the glowing orange of the sky through branches, expands and contracts, beating like a silent heart. The tree's downward fall decelerates as it gets caught in low branches, then in the surrounding brambles until it comes to a rest. As it does the moths disperse, their black wings becoming indistinguishable from the night.

Speedy work is then engaged in; the branches need to be removed so that only the trunk remains which can be picked up and carried single file by half a dozen or so of us. We work quickly.

"How legal is this?" I wonder out loud as I'm passed a pair of long handled secateurs, and told to strip branches off. Richard's form shakes with laughter and a few mocking clouds of tobacco smoke are released.

Most things teenagers enjoy doing in Solihull are at best severely frowned upon, and usually prohibited if not technically illegal. It keeps us in our place, like the man down my road whose house is situated at the bottom of a slight incline. He therefore covers the pavement outside his house with sharp gravel and stones to stop us committing the terrible outrage of skateboarding past his house. A nice man. Dead now, I expect, his heart only slightly colder in death than it was in life. If someone does happen to look up from their telly, see a tree disappearing from behind their garden and phone the police, then we will have a lot of explaining to do, I think. Mind you, it is not clear what the awful majesty of the law would tell us to do. Tell us to put the tree trunk back where we found it?

The trunk is manhandled down the bank to the river's edge; we line up single file along its length and heave it onto our shoulders. It is wet, cold, muddy and slimy with moss. Poor Richard with his ickle legs is a few inches shorter than the rest of us so he doesn't get much of it on his shoulder, but this indignity is countered by him not having to put his cigarette out like the rest of us.

We shuffle along the edge of the brook. This is seriously dangerous now. It is pitch black, the uneven concrete edge of the river is smeared with treacherous mud and leaf mould. Branches try to push us into the water and roots try to trip us as the trees take revenge for their fallen comrade. We are travelling by instinct rather than by sight, and if one of us were to slip and fall they would probably have pitched the tree trunk and all the rest of us into the dreary blackness of the water. In actual fact I don't think the water is all that deep, so a Tragic Multiple Loss of Life, Most Famous West Midlands Teenaged Band Since Musical Youth All Drowned would probably have been avoided, but there would have been no way of avoiding Richard's cigarette being extinguished. After a few hundred yards the blackness in front is ripped by the orange lights of the street where we first climbed down. As we arrive back at the little path and gap in the wall, we put the tree trunk down, out come the cigarettes and Ruth can finally erect her defensive cordon around Richard. A scout is sent out to check that the streets between the river and Richard's house are clear. They are, so the trunk is inelegantly dragged up the muddy embankment, onto the street, and then back to Richard's garden. We all climb inside The Bung, light a fire and our cigarettes and warm up our wet, muddy and slimy selves.

MY TENURE IN THE DICK CLUB is brief; it lasts the autumn and winter but doesn't make it into the revealing sunlight of spring and summer. This time is spread in my memory like a brilliantly shining red and orange necklace laid on a dark background. In its facets I can see the reflections of burning fires, and long stares into their red hearts, I can smell the woodsmoke, and feel the stuffy warmth while wind and rain are rendered incapable of touching us despite being only a thin wooden sheet away. I can feel the darkness inviting me, hear the hoots of laughter with Richard, the camaraderie with the band and the other members of The Dick Club to be

found in The Bung's enigmatic dark shadows. I can feel the sense of being closer to some underlying truth of life, that Richard has somehow created a space where the falsity of suburban living is peeled away to reveal something wild and honest underneath. And reflected in all of this I can see poor old Janet, marching out in wind, rain and snow to eject us all apologetically, but very firmly at eleven on the dot.

JANET WISHES ME a Merry Christmas as I am whooshed through the house. The door that the dog is trying smash down to get at me is hung about with tinsel. As a special seasonal celebration Richard has decorated the little clearing outside The Bung with flickering hurricane lamps hung in the trees. I have a sheaf of paper in my pocket, and I have been busy learning my lines. Inside The Bung all normal business has been suspended; Ruth allows free interaction with Richard and The Grit have called a one night amnesty on describing everything as gay. The Bung is illuminated with candles which flicker with festive light, speckling the space with warm starlight, and combining with the glowing fire to fill The Bung with a beautiful, living, moving radiance.

For this is the season to be merry and in particular it is the season for Richard's self penned Christmas play. It is his version of *The Christmas Carol*, mostly chosen because of the enormous comedy potential of having a character called Bob Scratchit. Richard has been busy for several weeks composing this, writing out several copies of the script with a fountain pen in his irregular but flowing cursive handwriting and his eccentric, phonetic spelling.

I have helped occasionally the writing process, my role being to sit next to Richard in his backroom, while he thinks up good jokes, tells them to me, I agree that they are good jokes and he writes them down. Throughout this Richard continually expresses a lingering regret that he can't do a James Mason voice.

“When I hear Scrooge’s words in my head they are said by James Mason. But I can’t do him. It just comes out as a sort of angry Angela Lansbury. I can’t think of myself as being good at doing voices if I can’t do James Mason.”

My more constructive contribution to Richard’s writing process is to illustrate the scripts with a splattering of big nosed and googly-eyed cartoon characters. I am fairly good at this, but like much else, drawing has been condemned by Gary as gay, and I’ve kept this capability to myself lately. Richard is delighted by this as we realise that we have another interest in common, and adds in his own array of similarly big nosed googly-eyed illustrations.

“Here, look at this,” he says, rattling around on a bookshelf and producing a book of cartoons by ‘Larry’ (famed, not least, for illustrating the opening credits of the *Carry On* films). We leaf through in quiet awe, because we realise that we are the presence of a master. Larry’s repeated trope is statues in galleries doing ridiculous things with ‘*Rodin’s Dustman*’ or ‘*Rodin’s Legless Drunk*’ written on the plinth.

Silence is called for and the actors in Richard’s Christmas Carol arrange themselves around the fire ready to play our parts. We are all supposed to play our own characters, but in essence we have all been given bit parts, so that Richard can play all the good parts using a dizzying array of voices.

We watch as Scrooge advises Bob Scratchit to eke out a little warmth in the office by setting fire to his family. Scrooge recalls the dance put on by his employer Mr Fizzy-fazzyfuzzywig, and we dance along, either doing Adam Ant’s *Prince Charming* dance, or air guitaring and head-banging according to personal preference. We weep with the raw pathos as Belle refuses to marry Scrooge on account of his being so extraordinarily ugly. The Ghost of Christmas Present lights the brandy on his Christmas pudding and burns down all of Old London Town. The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come accidentally falls in the grave that is meant for Scrooge. We cheer along the moving final scene as Tiny Tim, a nineteen

stone all in wrestler, who can fight two sailors at a time down the docks, is seen to have the most wonderful Christmas of all time as the Scratchit family and a reformed Scrooge gather to have a traditional family game of Kerplunk. Dotted through this Richard and I will occasionally freeze into (thankfully) fully dressed *pose-plastiques* and then after a couple of seconds Richard will say *Rodin's Bah Humbug* or *Rodin's Biggest Turkey in the Shop Window*. Inevitably this is met by blank incomprehension by everyone else, but this only heightens the pleasure of Richard and me sharing our own in-jokes.

Janet has also relaxed the licensing laws for this one evening, and the revels continue into the earliest hours, Richard's fire perpetually emitting light and warmth. His lethal home distilled spirit is dispensed (made by heating cider homebrewed from a kit in a kettle with a long metal pipe attached to the spout to catch the condensing spirit). This wrecks eyesight, balance and sense of propriety and renders the whole of The Dick Club a hopelessly and splendidly dissolute rabble, singing Christmas carols laced with pathetic teenaged innuendo until our smoke ravaged throats can sing no more.

After we finally disperse I work my way home through the quiet Solihull streets, then take the shortcut to my house that runs alongside the golf course. There is a little ornamental stream that runs through a dip in the links. It has been foggy and wet, but as I walk home the sky clears leaving a mist clinging the dip that forms an ethereal silver moonlit lake that I walk through. Freezing cold, I wait in the dripping empty trees that line the golf course and watch as the moon sets straight into the lake of mist which turns orange then red with the changing colour of the setting moon.

Years later, after I'd completely forgotten about it Richard phoned me in a tiz because he'd just watched *The Muppets' Christmas Carol*. Instead of just one Ghost of Marley, they have the puppets Statler and Waldorf play the Marley

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Brothers: Jacob and Robert. Richard had just got the joke and yelled, “Robert Marley! Why didn’t I think of that?” down the phone at me.