

KING OF THE WOODS

The Story So Far

IT IS SUMMER 1990 and the narrator has packed in the dead-end jobs he'd been doing since leaving school in order to go to university. However he's mucked up the timing and finds himself with no job or money for the summer, so he's moved back to his home town to live with his parents. There, he's met up with Richard, a friend from his teens, and they are now finding that they share a lot more in common than they'd realised before. In their teens they'd been in a terrible heavy metal band, whose total musical incompetence was drowned out by the guitarist's self belief.

It is a beautiful summer. Richard and the narrator are taking great delight in aimlessly pottering around the Warwickshire countryside. In parallel they are dreaming up an idyllic fantasy woodland which they potter about in using the airship they've made from string vests and tea-towels. The thing is, the real world and the fantasy world are beginning to merge...

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CHAPTER III

More Braindead than Usual



I NOW REALISE why Richard approves of my car. His is even slower. And noisier. However whereas I would be nervous driving my Mini directly into the teeth of a strong wind in case it got blown away, Richard's massive tank of a long wheel base Land Rover wouldn't be deflected if driven into the teeth of a pyroclastic lava flow. It grumbles at the street, gnashing its gears and grinding its axels, clearly offended by being driven about on namby-pamby metalled roads, when it should be wild and free to plough a U-shaped glacial valley through some farmland somewhere.

My main source of income for the summer is a weekend job bar tending in an appalling 'fun' pub on Solihull's outskirts, and so most of my days are free and I've been accompanying Richard on his gardening jobs. My role is to be stand-in for an in-car entertainment system. His Land Rover was built on strictly puritanical lines, its one and only function being to move relentlessly forward, overriding or demolishing all obstacles in its path. Any comforts it supplies to its driver and passengers while doing this were viewed by its designers as decadent and sinful. It therefore doesn't have a radio, heating, padded seats or any dials and meters other than a red warning light that illuminates to indicate that the oil temperature has reached around two thousand four hundred degrees Fahrenheit and the whole engine is therefore liable to melt.

"Crazy words, crazy tune, all you'll ever hear him croon." I sing over the bellowing engine, accompanying myself on the banjolele.

"Vo-de-o-do. Vo-de-o-do-do." we sing together, this being the the only bit I've managed to teach Richard so far.

Richard wrenches violently at the steering wheel in an attempt to stop the Land Rover travelling in its preferred straight line and bring it round into a driveway. The Land Rover roars at the indignity but soon comes to a hulking rest. We are outside a generic semi-detached, with a rather overgrown garden. The lady of the house emerges looking a bit bewildered. She is expensively tailored and her coiffure speaks of long gruelling hours spent in one of Solihull's many hair salons.

"What was that noise? The whole house shook. Having one's house shaken to bits on a Tuesday morning suggests to me that Socialism may have gone too far."

Richard climbs down and explains.

"It's the Land Rover. It likes to make an entrance."

"Indeed so. But one often finds that those who like to make entrances have their exits made for them."

Richard is not abashed. "I believe silence in motor vehicles to be an overrated virtue. Silent rivers might run deep, but the only reason for a Land Rover to be silent is when it is sunk in a deep river. However allow me to apologise for my Land Rover. I'm Richard. You wanted some work doing in the garden?"

"Yes, of course. Now I should warn you that you weren't the first on my list of gardeners, but the gentleman who used to tend to my property was an intellectual. One so abhors intellectual horticulturists. Pruning hedges is too important a task to be left to those with qualifications. Do you have qualifications?"

"Not a single one."

"I am glad to hear it. Qualifications merely exist to prove to bores that the holder of the qualification is as uninteresting as the bores wish them to be. My husband, before his unfortunate disappearance, obtained many qualifications and his conversation became less tolerable with each one."

"Is it just the hedges you want trimming?"

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"No indeed. We live in times where a garden must display a high moral tone. I wish you tend to my garden in such a way that will elevate its principles. This garden does not currently speak of high minded principles. To be blunt, which I always am, it is scruffy."

"Well, we ca'n't have that," says Richard. "We'll get to work."

"Yes, I see you have brought an assistant..." I am viewed with censure. "...who appears to be somewhat scruffy himself."

"I use him as a guide. Once a garden becomes less scruffy than my assistant I know my work is progressing."

I am about the protest at being singled out as the scruffy one as Richard is clad in ripped jeans, cloddy boots, turbulent hair and a shirt that may have met an iron, but their relationship could at best be described as distant. And yet, somehow, he looks rather well dressed and smart. Again Richard fits rather snugly into the world around him, and I aimlessly ponder whether Richard is chameleoning himself into his surroundings, or, more likely, his very presence causes the environment to become a bit more Richard.

"Admirable," announces the lady. "I shall leave you to it and not interfere. One only likes to advise those working for you that they should amend their working practices if they are foolishly doing what you asked them to do."

Richard collects his most fearsome tools for cutting, chopping and snipping from the back of the Land Rover and we set to work. Richard claims *droit du jardinier* over the bigger bits of wood that we chop off and I ferry them to Land Rover, cutting up the smaller detritus for composting.

"I've been thinking about Gary and his guitar solos," I say as we work.

"Oh, I am sorry," says Richard.

"Hm. He was so noisy and boastful about being the best guitarist in the world. I wonder if he actually believed it himself."

“Dunno. I never really felt the need to get inside his head. The outside of it was bad enough.”

“Yeah, but when I look back on it now, it’s really clear why he didn’t want you to be in *The Grit*.”

“He said that I wasn’t heavy metal enough. Didn’t love metal in the way he did.”

“Yeah, but that was just crap wasn’t it? Neither did I with my prog rock albums and stuff.”

“That was different though. You only played keyboards, not big phallic guitar like everyone else. You had to stand at the back and they turned your amp down when they thought you weren’t looking.”

“Turning my amp down was one of the few musical things they did. You think about it though, when we used to rehearse round my parents’ house there were six of us, including you. And of the six of us only you were actually musical. And you were the one not allowed to play. Gary had to have realised that. Yes, you couldn’t stick three million minor pentatonic notes in two bars like he could, but you were the only one who could write songs.”

“Scruff wrote a song once.”

“No he didn’t. He put together the three barre chords that he’d just learnt to play and called it a song. They weren’t even the three chords that people who can only play three chords play. They were just three unrelated chords. I told you, I know about this sort of thing now. I read the book.”

“THAT’S IT,” said Scruff, having just played his precious three chords to Gary. “It goes ‘*Dang-dang da-dangity dang*’ then repeats.”

“Yes I’ve got it,” said Gary, turning up his amplifier in order to drown out everyone else. He violently strummed the chords on his pointy guitar.

Dang-dang da-dangity dang. Dang-dang da-dangity dang.

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Neil the drummer joined in with *Bum-blat bum bum blat*. Neil the drummer only ever did *Bum-blat bum bum blat*.

I twiddled the knobs on my keyboard and added a menacing whoosh. I did either menacing whooshes or scary honks. This sounded to me more of a menacing whoosh sort of song.

Brian the singer rifled through his notes to find some appropriate words, which he did and yelled them into his microphone. Its lyrical themes probably dealt with something assertively heterosexual. I couldn't tell, I wasn't listening.

So on we went for a few dozen bars, danging, blating, whooshing or yelling according to our assigned roles, and then it all came to its inevitable conclusion as Gary moved up to the top of his fretboard and discharged a million minor pentatonic notes in a desperate squeal. Or, as he liked to call it, his "solo". This marked the end of the song and after a while we all came to a stop. Neil the drummer had to be encouraged to shut up by a lot of waving hand gestures from the rest of the band. Like the bubonic plague, once Neil got going it was difficult to get him to stop.

"Yeah," said Gary. "That's a proper metal song." Clenched fists and scowling frowns were used to emphasise the point.

Richard, our mysterious sixth member and creative guru, was sat on top of an amplifier and looked pained by all this. There was one good song that we played. Its chords fitted together, it had a beginning, middle and an end, and the vocal melody had something to do with the chords that got played. There was one reason that this song stood out amongst the rest; we hadn't written it, Richard had. One evening Richard borrowed Gary's guitar and played us his song, and hoped we liked it. We did. We liked it so much that we decided—hilariously—that it would be our debut single. Gary then took his guitar back from Richard, and did his utmost to completely ruin it, by making it "a bit more metal". And despite the noisy travesty we made of it you could still tell that it was, at heart, a good piece of music.

"Anyway," said Gary. "Here's my news." He paused for dramatic effect, only for Neil to identify it as a silence and to start playing his drums again. After several minutes of everyone shouting at him, he stopped and Gary finally got to impart his news.

"I've organised us a gig."

"A gig?" we chorussed (which was one of the few occasions when we were all in time).

"Yep, school are doing a charity afternoon at the end of term, sort of like Live Aid and I've signed us up for it." He produced a playbill, which Brian scrutinised.

"We're only third on the bill?" asked Brian.

"It's a gig!" said Gary. "It's The Start. The Beginning. Even The Maiden had to start somewhere."

"We're billed below a reading by the fifth year poetry society and the school ballet society performing expressive dance to the music of Culture Club?"

"Well, if you're not dedicated enough," said Gary, invoking his most heinous insult. We all had to be absolutely dedicated to his band. Anything less meant that we didn't want to headline Donington, and therefore, let's face it, didn't like heavy metal. Which was unconscionable. "Anyway, we're billed above Mr Horner."

"Mr Horner the French teacher? What is Mr Horner doing on the bill?"

"The songs of Charles Aznavour," Gary read from the playbill. "In French. Accompanying himself on the accordion."

"I hated Mr Horner. And French. And especially Mr Horner teaching French."

I quite liked Mr Horner. And French. I kept my mouth shut.

"Scruff and I are going to have to take a day off work for this. Some of us aren't still at school. It's alright for you, Neil and Rich, you're all still in sixth form."

"School?" said Richard. "You've organised a gig at school?"

There was darkness swirling and dangerous crackles of electricity along the edge of the darkness. However much Brian didn't care for Mr Horner and French this could never match the hatred that Richard had for school. He had been expelled for an Unspeakable Crime, and whatever the Unspeakable Crime was, Richard resented his expulsion for it, the idiot teachers who expelled him and most of all the institution that allowed it to happen. Even Gary, who had all the natural empathy as a pack of hyenas, realised that having arranged this gig might upset Richard.

"Cheer up, Dick," he said. "You don't have to come."

"Oh, I'm going to come," said a voice from the swirling darkness.

Later that evening, the rehearsal had finished and a convoy of long suffering parents turned up in their estate cars to ferry their unmusical progeny and equipment home again. Richard helped unwire my synthesiser from its amplifier and made sure he was out of earshot of the rest of the band.

"That new song of Scruff's," he said. "Even more brain-dead than usual."

Richard didn't need a book on music theory to tell him this.

THE LADY OF the house comes out with two cups of tea.

"I could see you were working hard, and one finds the thought of hard work in others so exhausting," she says. "Time for a break?"

"That's very kind," says Richard.

We sit for a while and survey Richard's handiwork. About a third of the garden has been pruned until it has assumed a high moral tone as requested while the other two thirds billow green and wild in the sunshine.

"Look!" whispers Richard, pointing to an untamed broom bush.

"What? What am I looking at?" I whisper back.

"There. There."

Sure enough, as I peer into the green undergrowth two lively eyes look back.

TACKING TO STARBOARD and then to port, we steer the airship into a clearing, gently manoeuvring below the trees' canopy. Richard releases the anchor then we both jump onto the grass and secure the ropes. Surrounding the clearing is a circle of standing stones, weathered but still proud and watchful. To the west of the clearing is a circular stone larger than the others, stood on its edge like a balanced coin. Opposite it on the east side of the ring are two sharp stones pointed towards one another forming a gate. We pack a couple of rucksacks and put on our John Lennon sunglasses. I consult my elaborate brass and rosewood compass to decide which way to go. It doesn't point East, West, South or North, but is marked with intricate arrows that point to many strange directions including Uncertainty, Adventure, Danger, Ambiguity, Boredom and The Fabulous. Pivoting round, the compass rose finally comes to rest with The Fabulous pointing very firmly to the gate-like standing stones to the east. On the other side of the arch is a holloway leading deep into the trees.

"Excelsior!" we cry, and walk out of the stones towards the trees. Round the edge of the clearing the stones watch us as we go and then return to their quiet vigilance, still waiting for someone to unravel their lost mysteries which, under a younger moon and clearer sky, ancient hands had woven into their positions and alignments.

As we pass into the wood we both stop for a moment on the edge, one foot each in the sunlight, one foot each in the green shadow. The compass swings in an agitated manner pointing all the more determinedly into the woods and the winding path. Tucking it into my pocket I follow Richard into the woods, where he has already begun naming the trees.

Hawthorn, bay willow, wych elm, cherry, birch, elder and of course oak all grow in that wood. Elegant, immemorial

trees making green cathedrals of dizzying span, roots reaching deep into the supporting soil, collecting deep subterranean water and carrying it into the sky. If you could freeze a tree in time and then strip away the bark, the wood and the pulp leaving only the flowing water behind, then what a beautiful sight. Great solid columns of clear water, drawn from the soil and filtered into purity through the roots, the trunks made of thousands of tendrils of slowly flowing water, woven around one another, curling off into branches or breaking skywards. Coils of water gradually unwind towards the outer limits of the tree, unravelling into branches, twigs, and then into microscopic filaments that run around the leaves, watering and fuelling the biochemical reaction that turns sunlight and our breath into nutrients and clean blue oxygen. A tree is an organic skin around a spectacular fountain, growing broader and higher on a timescale that makes the lives of those of us who sit beneath for shade nothing more than pictures drawn in the sand at the turning tide.

We walk along the tunnel-like holloway, an ancient pathway cutting a bell distribution curve through the soil, green with warm moss and broken by dark twines of roots which support arched trees forming a pillared wall and vaulted roof. A clean breeze follows at our heels, blowing leaves and dandelion seeds and dancing butterflies along with us. Glimpsed behind one of the trees on our left is a sharp face that disappears as soon as we turn to look. As we continue we become more and more aware that we are being followed by a quick and silent shape in the trees, sometimes to our left, sometimes to our right. Light glances off a keen pair of eyes, and more than once a red brush of a tail is whisked behind a tree or into low lying brambles. Eventually Richard stops and addresses our shy companion.

“We mean you no harm, Sir Fox,” he calls into the trees. “Why not walk with us?”

“Perhaps I will,” says a voice close behind and we whirl around to find that a red fox is sitting nonchalantly on the

path behind us, its brush wound round its front paws, its air of *sang-froid* as pointed as its ears.

“What brings you to these woods?” he asks.

“We are looking for The Fabulous,” I say, and then consult my compass, “but it would appear that we are currently heading into Imperceptibility.”

“What an intriguing instrument,” says the fox, looking at my compass. I pass it to him and he takes it in his paw and turns it over critically, his curiosity as deep as the fur on his tail.

“It’s just a trifle of my own making,” I say.

“There is some good workmanship here,” remarks the fox. “But it doesn’t appear to be sensitive to fluctuations in Unorthodoxy.”

“No,” I say regretfully, “Unorthodoxy plays havoc with the Frippery gyroscopes.”

But the fox’s attention is diverted, and his carefully studied nonchalance slips for a moment.

“Is that lemon sherbet I smell?” he asks excitedly of Richard.

“Indeed so,” replies Richard, pulling the paper bag from his pocket and offering the fox a little. “Made with extra zing carefully extracted from the glint of a black kitten’s claws.”

The fox tries some and his eyes widen and his brush fluffs up and quivers, his enthusiasm as playful as his dance in moonlight.

“Quite delicious,” he says. Richard gives a good measure to the fox and he pops it into one of his secret foxy pockets, delightedly licking the residue off his paws.

“Let me exchange a story for your generosity. Come this way,” says the fox, looking up and down the holloway. “A path is not a good place for stories. Put a story on a path and it might run away with you.”

We follow the fox from the path to an open space among the trees, rays of sunlight illuminating its thin mists, drawing shifting fanned lines in the very air itself, ending in vigorous

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flares of colour on the ground. Elders cling and twine around the trees on the edge of the clearing, plates of white flowers showering yellow lemonade pollen in the summer sunlight. We sit with our backs to a tree stump. The fox sits elegantly in front of us, helps himself to a little more sherbet, which makes his ears twitch, then starts his story, his voice as clear as his shadow cast on deep water.