

Robin and Jim



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Things intensified after the summer of 1948, with Robin and Jim and me facing School Certificate exams at the end of the year, in July. Most kids, they'd be a year or two older than me, 'd be leaving school after that, so would Jim and Robin, but if I passed and did well enough I'd probably do what Our Kid'd done a year ago and move up to the Sixth Form and with luck get into university. Phil'd gone into the Science Sixth but there was no way I wanted to do that, I really hated Science, I didn't like the messy stinks of the Chemistry lab, and when we got to electricity in Physics I got completely lost, it didn't make any sense at all. Water was something I could see, as easily as I could see length or height, but volts and amps were absolutely beyond me. I couldn't for the life of me figure watts out, there was nothing to watch except needles on a meter or filaments in a light bulb, and all the terms in the textbook were defined by other terms I simply didn't get. What good was it to say, "we obtain the number of watts by multiplying volts by amperes" when all it told me about a volt was that it's a "unit of potential" and an ampere a "practical unit of intensity." Utterly meaningless. I knew that if I didn't go into the Arts Sixth I'd go *nowhere*.

Jim and Robin didn't have that sort of trouble. Robin had

his future mapped out for him on his dad's farm after he got through agriculture college at Sutton Bonington, and so far as I could see Jim wasn't bothered by anything at all, he went off home so many weekends that I began to think of him as a part-time boarder, never free on Saturdays and Sundays. But we still stuck together the way we had before, and we knew that whatever happened we'd still see each other after they'd left school and I'd stayed on, they lived close enough for that.

So far as the three of us were concerned School Certificate really did matter and we had to do well. You wrote not just one exam in one subject but a whole set of them in pretty well everything, it'd take nearly all week, one every morning, one every afternoon, two or three hours at a stretch, no breaks. "What you'll be doing for the rest of your life, and how you'll get on, depends on that exam," Henry Houston more than once told us, "so you'd all better pull your socks up and get on with some work, learn something before it's too late! You can't be just rabbits for your whole life!" *Munch, munch*, I thought, I couldn't help smiling to myself, *Lettuce doesn't grow on trees!* I remembered the eleven-plus exam I'd taken to get properly into Brewood when Broggie came, and I said how easy that'd been. Henry nodded as Prendergast said, "It won't be like that at all, will it Sir. You have to *know* things, how to *do* stuff." "Yes," Henry said, "what we've been doing in Geography. Map-reading, working out from the contour lines what you can see when you look along the coast or through a mountain pass, what's hidden behind a headland. Show you can *use* the map, and that you can *think*." *Like maths*, I thought, *or French. My French is pretty bad*. "You'll have to write an essay in French," King Evans had told us. "You have to take an oral exam if you take the Higher Certificate, and you'll need that if you go to University. You should learn some idioms anyway, it really helps to work those in," but he didn't tell us any. "You have to read some books in French," he said, "like *Eugénie Grandet*, that's the set book in the Sixth Form. Make it sound like a language people *speak*. That always persuades the examiners." Of course King's advice just like Henry's warning fell like water off a duck's back, and I never did get down to reading that set book, not all the way through. Somewhere and somehow I came across a few idioms and got so proud of *fleur à* that in July I actually worked it into a one-page French essay twice, my essay effort concocting some sort of

excuse for its generally irrelevant presence and no doubt affording the examiner a moment of exasperated weary humour, but I did manage to scrape through and get the mark I needed. Of course, like pretty much everyone else, I left it all to the last minute. "It's a long way off," Jim said, "plenty of time before the end of the year." He looked round. "Besides, School Certificate won't really make much difference to me," and when I asked, "Oh. I haven't told you yet." We hadn't seen each other all summer, and he said, "After I've done the School Certificate I won't be back." He lowered his voice a bit. "It's not settled yet, but we're probably going overseas, another country." That came as a surprise, we'd no idea. "We're keeping it quiet till it's settled, But Dad thinks he's got a job in Canada. So while we're here I've got to get whatever I can, especially my school certificate." And I could hardly believe my ears. *How could he do that? Terrible change, a bit frightening.* "Can't talk about it" Jim said, "not when it's all up in the air. There's a lot we've got to do, just simply so we can go, passports and stuff, lots to think about. It's not like just moving house y'know, the way Filo just did to Lichfield."

He blinked as he said that, took his glasses off and wiped them, and I nodded. But what a shock! All the way to Canada! I didn't know what I thought about that *Where would he be? What sort of place?* My life'd be so strange with Robin gone from School, Jim all those miles away, and me still here in School, in the Sixth Form, all of us in different places, gone for good. I couldn't think what to say. All I knew about Canada was from my stamp collection, with its pictures of pine forests and combine harvesters and fishermen, and it'd been a long time since we'd had to read that Fourth Form book about sod-busting the prairie, I didn't even know if Jim'd be in a town, let alone in a city, and with his usual streak of practicality Robin said, "It must be a worry. I've heard you can't take more than five pounds out of the country. You won't get very far on *that*. Exciting though. Bound to be interesting." And I wondered. I'd heard Dad talk about currency restrictions but had no idea what they might mean to anyone. "How will you manage?" Robin asked, "how can you move to another country if you can't take anything with you?" and Jim said "We'll just have to manage. But dad's looking after all that, says we might be able to get permission to take stuff with us so long as we can't sell it, and he'll have job. Can't take anything valuable with you though, like antiques. You can't even take a stamp

collection if it's worth more than five quid," and I thought of his dad's stamp collection, how proud he was of it, much bigger than Jim's, he must've spent years putting it together *How could you get rid of something like that?* "Will he have to sell it?" I asked, and wondered *What's the good of that if you can't take your money?*

"What about Griffiths?" Robin asked. "You should talk to *him*. He lived in Canada all through the War. He could tell you a whole lot," and Jim and I both nodded *Good idea!* We all knew Griffiths of course, how could we not? Griffiths'd turned up in 1946 as a new boy and gone straight into IV A, that made him senior to us, and I'd never even spoken to him he looked so exotic with his self-possessed air and his button-down shirt collars. Dad said Americans "don't even wear proper shirts, don't have our sense of dress at all" and Mum frowned, "Do they use collar-studs? I don't think they even know about detachable collars, I think they just take things to the laundry. So very extravagant." But a week later Jim said he'd learned a lot when they talked, and liked him. "He didn't tell me much really, hadn't lived in a big city like Toronto, made it all sound okay. Said it took him a while to get used to pounds shillings and pence and cars on the wrong side of the road but it's not much different from here. He's a nice guy, he actually listened to what I was saying. I feel a lot better about the move." And then he said, "Remember last year's Sports Day? How he just did it and looked pleased?" and Robin said, "He didn't boast, just did it. Like everything else he does, makes it a matter of course," and who could forget that Sports Day? He looked slow and heavy, this new kid from the Fourth Form, but Barnett on the First Eleven football team said Griffiths was a good middle-distance runner, "slow and steady, great stamina," but what did that mean, sorting runners like that.

We soon discovered that he could really sprint too. Every time his foot came down his head and shoulders slumped forward then straightened up, awful hard work, but he did better than anyone else at the Junior level, came in first or second eight times, from the hundred yards to the mile, sweaty and tired and pleased, just enjoying himself, big smile whether or not he won. We'd laughed in wonder when he won the Cricket Ball Throw, all of us lounging about in the sun, Barker as usual sprawled on the grass surrounded by his pals, a quick flurry and Morgan's indignant "Ow! That really hurt! *Quit* it!" as Barker pulled hard on the seedy grass-stem he'd

twisted into Morgan's hair, "You drew blood! For Christ's sake *stop!*" Even Barker perked into attentiveness as Griffiths got to the head of the contestants' queue. None of us ever paid much attention to that event, the contestants standing about so much between throws nothing happening, but one of the kids from Codsall'd said, "You don't want to miss this, it's amazing!" so we eyed the contestants waiting their turn at the canal end of the First Pitch and five or six Masters acting as judges halfway down the field to mark exactly where the ball'd land. Griffiths ran up to the crease-line *Blimey he's fast!* drew back his right arm and unwound, a lovely smooth flow, and *Crikey! Look at that!* some of us speechless as the judges all suddenly scampered and scrambled, Buddha Anderson almost falling over himself to get out of the way as the ball landed and bounced right where they'd all been standing and only Angus stayed put, he didn't even move an inch, he'd kept his artist's eye on the cricket ball up against the sky watched it bounce then strolled over to plant a small white peg where it landed, dusted his hands together smiled his elfin smile and looked satisfied as the other judges sorted themselves out. Henry Houston and Ticker measured it off from the crease, Ticker said something, and Henry shrugged as he wrote it down and smiled his tight little smile.

Griffiths'd thrown the ball miles better than the winner of the Senior throw an hour before, nobody came even close, all of us kids flabbergasted *Nobody'll beat that!* We didn't even bother to watch the next competitor, his throw looked so feeble, but "Don't be so mean-minded!" Henry said. "In any other year that throw would've been good enough to win. Certainly none of you reprobates could do as well." Griffiths'd set a School Record with a throw of seventy-one yards, and he did it again only better a month later, a bit more than seventy-two yards at an "Inter-School Athletic Meeting" with Wolverhampton Grammar School, and we all cackled away as the visitors scattered in a hasty jumble as he threw, we had warned them and they'd not listened, old rivals so much larger, richer and posher than us, and snooty with it.

That cricket ball throw made Griffiths a star. "Just a nine days wonder," he shrugged, "Anyone can learn how to throw." And when Jim went to talk to him about Canada a year later he said "I played Baseball before I came back here, outfield. I wasn't too bad, not as good as most of the team. You have to be able to throw, accurately

and fast, and we practiced a lot, we all did. Learned how at school. It's not like cricket, that didn't exist where I was," and when Jim told us all this I thought how Griffiths held his bat up above his shoulder as he danced down the pitch to meet the ball mid-air, clout it. "He's not so hot at bat," Robin said, "he doesn't really direct the ball but just swings, tries to turn every ball into a yorker. He gets caught a lot. Or lbw. A lot of power though, when he connects." Griffiths went his own way even at cricket, and he didn't seem to care what anyone thought. "He's very likeable," Jim said, "If we could see more of him we'd be friends, but he's not a boarder, goes home every day when we don't. *And* he's a Prefect." But I wasn't sure that'd make any difference.

At the beginning of Term Our Kid 'd at last been made a School Prefect, not that that'd make any difference to us, he had his own stuff to do in the Upper Science Sixth, and this Term I was a House-Prefect, as a result I had things to do, sometimes I'd get a bit narked when I had to be on Duty and had something else in mind, "Well, you wanted to be a Prefect" Our Kid said, "You can't complain because you've got things to do. School's not just a holiday, y'know." *Shades of Mrs Bailey!* I thought and wagging my finger chorused with him, "You're not here simply to enjoy yourself!" and laughed. In fact there wasn't any reason to get narked, I wasn't on duty all that much and had plenty of time to go off and enjoy myself, do things with Robin and Jim. We often went down Sandy Lane, perhaps we'd see Mrs Hatfield and who knows, perhaps she'd invite us in, a plump comfortable grey-haired woman quite a bit older than Mum, not a bit like her vinegary and school-teachery assistant Miss Butler, she always found a small treat for anyone on kitchen duty when she was there and she even got Miss Butler trained to reward helpers with "a little something." None of us really knew, and we weren't likely to if we didn't live in the village, it was none of our business anyway, but we'd been told she'd used to be Cook over at Weston Hall for the Earl of Bradford, along with her husband who we thought'd been a gardener or perhaps even a gamekeeper, but he'd died or more likely been killed in the Great War, and nobody ever talked about it. Sometimes we got glimpses of what she could do as a *real* cook. On dishes duty one Saturday I watched her squeeze elegant little peaks of coloured mayonnaise out of a paper bag she'd made into a funnel, to surround a huge salmon decorated with cucumber-slices arranged

like fish scales head to tail just like the pictures in Mum's copy of Mrs Beeton, and she still had time to find us a small slice of light fruit cake each. We loved the great big platters of broad beans and bacon she'd come in specially on her day off to make for Sunday supper when the beans were in season, we almost fought over that food as the Prefects carefully dished it out, everyone counted the beans on his plate, we always wanted more. I still now and again hanker for that smashing treat, chunks of thick salt bacon, the beans all glistening with bacon grease, bitter undertones from the beans, salty slight sweetness from the bacon.

None of us felt comfortable dropping in unannounced and uninvited, the second or third cottage down on the right, two-up two-down, front door straight off the pavement, a stone step straight into the parlour which opened up into the kitchen, stairs in-between on the left. On warm days she liked to keep the front door open, and the back, and you could see right through into the garden, an intense oblong of light greens and reds and yellows the other end of the dark indoors, a bit of a plum tree and an apple behind it, a low brick wall holding the raised garden back from what was immediately behind the cottage, the vague mass of a house looming up in creamish stone or plaster, the shadow of its bulk, leaves shifting and murmuring in the sun, red gingham-check curtains framing the window's beckoning delicate landscape. Lupines and daisies, picture-book tidy, the eye drawn past the brass glowing here and there in the room, a brick path outside the back door, connecting all the cottages the way ours did at Lichfield, a good place to sit. Back in the kitchen she had a favourite chair by the big iron range, and we'd walk past quickly, I'd do a little dip, bob my head down a bit and over to the right as I rubber-necked, half-hid my face behind the peak of my School cap. The three of us must have looked terribly furtive about it all, trying to see if she was there, we didn't dare intrude, but we'd dawdle a bit, hope she'd see us and perhaps even invite us in, of course she knew perfectly well what we were up to. One Sunday the bus from Wolverhampton came in just before we reached the Square and Mrs Hatfield got off, we nearly didn't recognize her in her street clothes her hat firmly on her head, she put her basket down to get at her key, I started to say something I'd no idea what, some sort of reason for being there I suppose but Jim rescued me, he said "Hullo, Mrs Hatfield, can we help you with that?" and went

a bit pink, we all did, such a pretty daft question but this glimpse of her having a life outside the School was a bit disconcerting, Cook in an old comfortable-looking tweed coat just like Mum's instead of the white coverall she always wore in the kitchen, it looked like Mr Hutchings's lab coat only it was clean. "That's all right, boys, I'm used to managing" she blinked as she smiled, us bursting with curiosity, picked up her basket and said "Do you want to see?" her glasses blinking in the light, "Come on in, then," and we went in and she showed us the parlour, "I like to sit just there," she said, "That's my sister's chair, we make ourselves comfortable" and as we turned to leave she said "It was nice of you to stop just now" and she smiled again. "Perhaps one of these days you'll come by and stop for a visit" and I nodded, I expect the others did too as we said thank you but I felt like a great clumsy lummo, all of us galumphing in on her private life like that.

We didn't really tell anyone what'd happened. I sort of wanted to boast, knowing Cook in a way the others didn't, but it was too private for that, knowing we could go back. It was our secret, and it was also hers. Talking about it would've been a bit like talking about life at home, personal stuff, nobody else's business. Yet what difference would it make to anybody else if we now and again went to see Cook and she'd fed us tea. I worried that we might be a nuisance and Robin and Jim, once he was coming back again almost every weekend, agreed. "Yes, we've got to be careful not to, but she can always just say Hullo and leave it at that, can't she," and it wasn't long before the three of us got into the hopeful ritual of cutting our Sunday walks a bit short, loop back around the village so we could come up past her house and hope she'd notice. We could always say we'd been down to the village cricket ground across from Dolly Asprey's, we all went quite often down to Deansfield to watch anyway, lots of kids did. Then one Sunday on our way back to School Mrs Hatfield's door was open and Jim knocked hard, stuck his head a bit round the jamb and leaned, "Hullo Mrs Hatfield, we're on our way back from the cricket. It's over already, and we thought we'd just say hullo as we came by. The village won by seven wickets," as if we had anything to do with *that*, and I could hardly believe my ears *How'd he dare do that?* Mrs Hatfield came in from the garden and said "Oh hello boys, I thought I'd heard you. That's nice of you to drop by, would you like to come in for a bit? I haven't

seen much of you lately, not even at School. I suppose we've all been busy." She looked back into the garden. "I'm just making myself a cup of tea, and I'm sure you'd like some too. Come in and make yourselves comfortable."

We looked at each other, "I don't —" I started in a low voice. Robin gave me a look and asked "Can we do anything to help?" and she said we could set the table, told us where to find things, and we Nosey Parkered our way around the room, "That's alright," she said, "but don't touch anything!", old photos on the wall, a calendar, a sampler, different kinds of embroidery stitches in all sorts of colours, a lot of them faded, the alphabet, and flowers, and a name and a date, eighteen-eighty-something-or-other, it was too far away to see clearly up on the wall above the mantelpiece and as she came in with a tray she said "I did that when I was a young girl, we all did one in those days. Careful work." I thought of the one at Alcester and told her my Aunt Dot had one on the farm done by her mother a long time ago. Jim said he'd never seen one before and Robin said in surprise "I thought everyone had one" and then nobody said anything for a while. Jim picked something up on the mantelpiece and showed it to Robin and I looked at some of the photographs on the wall as we all fell silent, I couldn't think of anything to say, Mrs Hatfield busy behind me, and suddenly "Why don't you come and sit down?" Bread and butter, little rock-cakes, a bowl of watercress, celery sticks, and she looked at the whatsit Robin and Jim had got from the mantelpiece and said "The Earl of Bradford gave me that, a long time ago, when I'd been working for him for ten years, it's very old brass, it's fragile so be careful, it came from India." I sat on the edge of my chair and looked at the other two, perched on the edge of theirs, "Who are all those photographs?" I asked as Jim pointed "Are those horse brasses? I've seen some of them in shops, but mum and dad aren't interested." "Those are real ones," she said, "they're not fake. They come from the tack room at Weston Park, some from canal horses from before the First War," I thought they were smashing, probably worth a bit, but they weren't, not then, people were just beginning to collect things like that. Dad'd said that the gin palace over in Sutton Coldfield on the main road was full of them, trumpery Brummagem-ware, fake like the beams and the half-timbered outside walls, but I wondered how you could tell. "These are heavy," Robin said, "not flimsy. *Look* at 'em, they're not *machine-*

made.” Mrs Hatfield nodded, “the irregularities,” she said, and told us the photographs were old too. “People in the village,” she said, a big square man with big black muttonchop whiskers his head full of hair, wearing a leather apron, his elbow on the table at his left, his eyes looking a bit astonished over your left shoulder as you looked at him, a slightly cross and bewildered look on his face, full of contained and impatient energy. “He was the village blacksmith,” she said, “he died when I was about eight or so, quite an old man by then,” it must have been an old photograph then, “Oh yes it is,” she said, and pointed to a sepia photo of a great big windmill, great holes in the walls and one of the vanes fallen off, *where’s that? There aren’t any windmills round Brewood* “There used to be lots,” she said, “A big one at Wheaton Aston,” and she told us about the metal works and charcoal burners in Penkridge and the maltings and forges at Brewood in the old days, we didn’t even know the Spinney’d been dug out by navvies to build the canal embankments. We’d never heard of any of it. We sat there guzzling our watercress sandwiches and celery, and bread and butter and rock cakes. “Didn’t anyone tell you about Ironbridge?” We all shook our heads, we’d all heard of it and Robin’d been there once, “Used to be an ironworks there,” he said. “I’m surprised you don’t know,” she said, “It’s less than twenty miles away. Where they built the very first cast-iron bridge in the world, two hundred years ago, it’s famous, one of the Seven Wonders. A lot of things have happened round here, don’t they tell you any of this at school?” She shook her head a bit and told us that Thomas Telford’d built the aqueduct to carry the canal over the Watling Street, we knew the Watling Street of course built by the Romans, we knew that the way we knew Julius Caesar’d invaded England in 55 B.C. “It’s made of iron that aqueduct, and Telford’s still a famous man,” and we nodded. Nowadays a plaque on it says the aqueduct was built in 1832, but there never used to be any notice boards telling people what things were or who they belonged to or where footpaths went, at least not since they’d all been taken down in the War. Nobody’d ever said a word to us about Ironbridge. Perhaps they didn’t know, like that teacher who hadn’t known how to spell Cheslyn Hay. “Were there iron works round here?” I blurted, and Jim looked at me “Well of course there were, you chump, we’re right on the edge of the black country, coal and iron.” “There used to be lots of ironworks, but not like Dudley or Walsall” Mrs Hatfield said,

“and that’s what keeps us all going isn’t it, not kings and queens.” She looked away. “The Earl of Bradford’s a nice man. I liked working at Weston Park. I like going back to visit now and again, but not very convenient from here. You could go over on your bikes.”

“I really learned a lot” I said as we three walked back to School. “She knows so much about this place,” Robin said, “Who’s done what and where. Not what we get in History.” “Yeah,” I said, “I can never sort out the two William Pitts, What difference do they make, anyway?” and Jim told me not to be so daft, “of course they matter, the way Gladstone and Disraeli matter, it’s what they did then that makes us what we are now,” but I couldn’t see that. It wasn’t like Turnip Townsend, he changed the way we grow food, changed farming practice.

We never said a word about our visit to Cook’s, but something got about anyway and later that week Buddha said in class “Yes, you know nothing about local history, and you should. The best place to start would be the history of the School, it’s been here a long time, four hundred years, just about,” and next day he told us about famous people who’d been at the School, we’d never heard of any of them. After less than five minutes on William Pitt, he spent the whole class on Richard Hurd, son of a Penkridge farmer and “our most famous Old Boy,” Bishop of Lichfield and then Bishop of Worcester until he died in 1808. “I’m going to set up a Debating Society in the School,” he told us, “we’ll call it the Hurd Society after him. We ought to have his works in the school library, I’ll have to see what we can do about that.” We knew no more about Hurd than we knew about William Huskisson, but we delighted in the fact when he told us that Huskisson was the first person in the world to’ve been killed by getting run over by a train. I told myself “*getting* run over” made it sound like Huskisson did it on purpose, and it was icing on the cake when Buddha said Huskisson’d got run over in 1830 by George Stephenson’s *Rocket*, the most famous train of all. But Jim was scornful. “That’s not *History*,” he said that night, “It’s just *gossip*, it doesn’t say anything about why people do what they do, it doesn’t tell us a thing about how they lived,” and I wondered. *Why wasn’t talk about the ancien regime or the two Pitts just Gossip?* The unbidden memory popped into my head how when I’d been taking Agriculture a couple of years ago because I thought I wanted to be farmer Uncle Tom’d gestured at the field over the hedge. “Take a look at those

oats. What d'you think?" I looked at Dad and didn't say anything, that was his and Dad's business, not mine. "No, Peter, I'm asking *you*" Tom said. "You say you want to be a farmer." *What am I supposed to say?* I hadn't even been sure they were oats until he said so, and he said "Look at the leaves, they're a touch yellowy aren't they." And I looked. "Oh," I said, "Yes!" and they were, not that lovely fresh green you get in a young plant. "Need a top-dressing of lime, don't you think?" Dad said, and Tom nodded, "A bit acid, yes." That completely flummoxed me, it wasn't the sort of thing we did at School, we didn't talk about soil conditions, we talked about crop rotation, cattle disease, different sorts of blight, and took dictated notes, but we didn't really *look* at anything. We did drawings and tables for prep, and that wasn't gossip, it was *useful* even if we couldn't actually use it.

But why had we spent so much of last Term learning about bees when there wasn't a single hive anywhere on the school grounds? At Alcester Tom'd walk down to the fields in the summer and pluck an ear of wheat oats or barley and rub it in his hands and blow off the chaff and even bite the grain left in his hand. "What do you think?" he'd ask whoever was with him, "Not quite ready yet, is it," and he'd cock an eye at the weather, so crucial as harvest-time got closer. At School we never got anything about that any more than we got told about John Bright or the Middle Passage. William Wilberforce, yes, he was a hero, but we got nothing about the everyday, what a poet called the attractions of living recorded, just famous names and famous events, powers and agreements, wars and battles, a long way from anything local or even useful. We had to get what Buddha called a "decent grounding," that's what the School Certificate was all about, so we read about Mazarin, Metternich, and Richelieu, and I was completely lost when Buddha told us to write an essay deciding *Was Louis XIV a good king or not*. How would I know? I got an inkling of what I might say when I was complaining about it to Mike Mortimore in Mrs Roberts's tuck shop, he was nuts about history and after doing his national service a couple of years down the road he went to Oxford and got a degree in it, and a kid from the Nash waiting for a bottle of pop looked at Mike and me, "If you're askin' *me*," he laughed, "and yeah I know you're *not*, what do we 'ave kings *for*? What good are *they*?" Coming the way it did, from a Nash kid, that took me by surprise, it was the sort of question a

teacher or someone in the Sixth Form might ask, but as we walked out the door Mike nudged me “His dad probably votes Labour” he smirked, and I shrugged. I hadn’t connected what we did at School with politics. It wasn’t until a couple of years later and I’d left School altogether that I realized I didn’t have to be a staunch Conservative like Mum and Dad but could go my own way. Not that I knew what the choices were, *Labour* and *Conservative* were just empty words.

By the time the weather got better and the days longer Jim once again started going home for the weekend more and more. “A lot to do before we emigrate” he said, and I liked the way that word marked him off from the ordinary, “All the kerfuffle and the interruptions get in the way, take up all the time. I never get my prep done,” and one Saturday with Robin and me a bit bored and Jim off at home again for the weekend Robin said, “Let’s go for a bike ride?” and I gave him a look *Where?* “I don’t mean *now*,” he said, “but tonight, I mean *really* tonight, after everyone’s gone to bed,” and that was so outlandish it took me aback. “Colin James does that, quite a bit, him and a couple of others, he says it’s terrific, nobody else about, it’s ever so quiet, they get everywhere. ’Course, he does it at home, still has to sneak out, but we could do it here. Probably easier. Just have to be quiet.” Colin lived close to Wheaton Aston. “Out to the rezzer, over to Weston under Lizard, all over the place, they cover a lot of ground.” Suppressed excitement as I lay in bed that night, I didn’t have a watch but Robin had his, *Have to get dressed, carry my shoes downstairs, have to be absolutely quiet* and then a quiet shuffling, Robin nudged me, hardly breathing nodding his *come on!* Scarcely a cloud on this clear night, half moon, black shadows, *Watch out! That creaks! Catch the door before it slams!* Colours all washed out, faint clatter as we got our bikes out of the bike shed but no, no sign of anybody. Climb on, a huge sigh of relief, the faint bubble of a laugh wells up, a stifled *whoop* as we pedal through the Gate *Ssssh!* and down School Road to turn past Mrs Roberts’s to Church Road and another *Ssssh!* but this time with a grin as we scoot past Newport Street and turn along Bargate from the empty square, faint light behind a curtain upstairs at the Lion, faint *click, click* I can hardly hear but regular as my pedaling foot and breath, a constant register each time the rising crank arm

grazed the back strut *click!* pause, and *click!* slight wobble of the pedal *I never did get that fixed!* the quiet susurrus of our tires on the blacktop down Kiddemore Green Road, pale grass, long shadows, stir of movement in the hedge, the sudden loom of something big, heart jump as a cow shifts in the field, a pair of bright eyes and a shadow in the field as you pass by everything quiet except your breath and the tyres, magical, and *Oh!* Robin freewheels almost to a stop, stands in his saddle, points, our bikes quietly ticking as we coast neither of us pedaling *Is that a fox?* the faint hiss of our tires scarcely a disturbance in this transformed landscape, ribbon of road pale under the moon, an owl, the sound of a distant car, flurry of wings dark shadow overhead *that owl! Hunting,* crossing the field from wood to coppice, and you stand on the pedals again to see and the edge of your shirt lifts as you crest a slope, a sudden cool breath of night air at your waist and here's a five-barred gate, soft rustles in the hedgerow *something bigger, that's no rabbit!* Way over the soft patchwork of fields and barns and houses a subdued bark, dog to fellow dog, one farm to another, *relax! it's not us it's after!* a grey and black patched hump across the field melts into a Friesian cow, and then more cows *Whose dairy farm?* A yellow glow outlines the slope ahead of us, trees on both sides, and we scramble off our bikes pull them onto the verge and lay them down *Hurry before it gets here* the doubled V stares into the sky not in a rush but not slow either down the middle of the road, a patch of nettles black behind the stark then washed-out green, yellow carlight defines a shifting patch of weirdly strange yet familiar roadside, and you crouch down to hide your face, you snatch a quick look and blink away the abrupt dazzle and the tears it brought, the light fades round a corner and the engine-sound five seconds after, silence restored. The village doctor on his way back home *who's he been to, this hour of night? Hope it's no one we know* and you resist its faint hint of inside knowledge, possible gossip, climb back on your bike the saddle cool the crossbar cold against your leg the handlebar wet with dew from the long grass you just now put it down in. "Perhaps we should go back" I breathe, "turn round" but we pedal on, down a dip and up the other side *How far is it to the rezzer?* the quiet exhilaration of this silent world as we glide between hedgerows. A light comes on as we cruise past a barnyard *Crikey! What time is it?* We zoom past Butler's farm at the head of Shutt Green Lane but no, we won't get to the rezzer not this trip,

save it for the next, silhouettes of trees, the dense ribbon of the Milky Way still dusted across the sky the North Star bright, no faint light of dawn over in the east *It's long before false dawn, the birds are all dead quiet* and we stop to catch our breath and listen. Then we turn back, sneak up the stairs "Gosh, that was smashing! Do it again," get back to bed its sheets suddenly cool against my busy skin, nobody stirs, and I settle.

But "*I don't know,*" Jim said next day when we told him about it at Break, what we'd done and where we'd been, "It sounds terrific. Yes, I'd like to do that, sounds fun." He looked at me. "But I'm not so sure. We're all senior, 'n' Peter *you're* a Prefect. What'd you do if you caught someone from the first or second dorm, junior kids Third Formers doing that, sneaking off in the middle of the night to go for a bike ride, would you let them? Not *do* anything?" None of *them would*, I thought, not *them!* But then *What about seniors?* I thought, and "Well," I said, "Dicky Feltham went off to the rezzer a couple of weeks ago, three of 'em, for a swim in the middle of the night. Been more than once, a lot of people know about that. And they're all in the Sixth Form, they're senior to us. One of *them's* a Prefect." I remembered what Dad'd called the perks of his job, how scrupulous he was about them. A couple of years back, he'd brought a tin of peaches from the store so we could have a treat, "We only got one case, twenty-four large tins, for the whole store, sold them all as we were putting them on the counter. Ridiculous, really," he'd said to Mum as he handed it over, "I've already paid for it, and taken the points from my ration-book." I didn't say anything about that to Jim but it's what I had in mind. You have to *earn* the privileges of rank, I thought, that's why they're called *privileges*. But Jim shook his head, "That's not honest. we all have the same *rules*. And it's not *fair*. You can't go bogging off to enjoy yourself when you've told everyone else they can't, that's hypocritical. Rules should be the same for everyone," and settling down to sleep that night I feared Jim was probably right.

As it turned out we only went off at night a couple of times after that, perhaps there was a connection. "Nothing to stop you doing it at home" Jim said, "but you'd have to tell your mum and dad what you're doing. Where you're going, too. Something could happen." As soon as I got home for the summer Mum said "*No!* It's far too dangerous, cycling all those main roads in the dark, no.

Even if you've got good lights on your bike. *No.*" And "besides," Our Kid said, "who'd you go with? It's not a good idea, you can't go by yourself. And cycling in the dark even with a light, specially round here? That's completely *daft*, you'd get run over in less than'n hour!" A month or two later, almost as soon as he left school, once he'd got a job in Birmingham and was living in digs he began to bike home every weekend, Birmingham to Lichfield and back, "I'm used to traffic," he said. "You're not. And I know the back roads," I was glad it wasn't me trying that, though when I got to Nottingham three years later I cycled the three or four miles to school and back every day and it was safe enough. Everyone used bikes.

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[This is taken from the revised version
of Chapter 31 of *Growing Dumb*]