One Train Later

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Extract

One

I am born at the edge of the River Wyre in Lancashire, where my dad is stationed with the RAF in the north of England. Housing is in short supply and he makes the purchase of a Gypsy caravan. It is a romantic move, but one of necessity. My mother is known as Red; she is pregnant, and works in a bomb factory alongside a gang of northern girls called the Fosgene Follies. One day, in her ninth month, she becomes intoxicated by the fumes leaking from a faulty bomb and, having contractions, is carried back to the field where she lives with my dad. I come into this world a few hours later, and the queen of the Romany vagrants in the next field pays a visit to my mother. She hands over a small piece of silver, six eggs, and a piece of white linen—all traditional gifts intended to bring a propitious future. Sitting on the floor with a pack of tarot cards and a meaningful look on her face, she looks up at the young flame-haired woman leaning back into the pillow with her baby and begins shuffling the cards. But Red, with her attraction to the

occult still in place and me dangling from her nipple, struggles up and looks across expectantly.

Red gives up her job as a bomb packer, and as the war comes to an end my parents return to the south of England and the beaches of Bournemouth, with their huge rusting curlicues of barbed wire and lonely skeletal piers. I stand on the promenade, clutching my mother's hand as my dad explains to me through the biting wind that we have blown up the piers to prevent the Germans from getting onto our shore. My five-year-old brain is filled with hordes of helmeted men racing across the sand with thick stubby guns. Around the town are the ruins of several buildings, destroyed after the Luftwaffe dropped their remaining bombs before heading back over the Channel to Germany. *What if one lands on your head?* I wonder. *Would you blow up?*

Near our house on the outskirts of town is a large wooded area by the name of Haddon Hill. Filled with oak, pine, beech, chestnut, and birch that spread for miles, it becomes the arena of my childhood where other boys and I wrestle and fight in the dirt, throw stones at dogs, torture cats, start fires, steal birds' eggs, and piss on flowers. Sometimes we find old boxes of gas masks and other wartime paraphernalia that have been guiltily dumped among the trees. We instantly put these things on and race off into the elms and oaks, howling at the top of our lungs. At the end of an afternoon with hours of ambush, screaming, and cruelty under our belts, we return home. As the evening stars emerge and the lampposts in the street begin to create their yellowish flare, we trail into our mothers' kitchens looking like miniature versions of the home guard. With our gas mask tubes bouncing on our puny chests and sensible sweaters, we look upward to ask with a

voice muffled by rubber tubing, "Can I have something to eat, Mum?"

The woods fill my imagination, because secretly I am a nature lover, something I don't betray to the other boys, and I become an expert on secret paths, trees with holes in them, owls' nests, places where you can find slowworms and adders, the pale blue eggs of the chaffinch.

I scrawl weird signs in the dirt as if they contain hidden meaning, my keys to the whereabouts of a rookery or a dump of used wartime supplies. I spend every minute I can in this place until I feel as if I know every vein on every leaf, the knots in trees, where rolling waves of beetles race from under rotting logs and where the venom-filled adders lie in wait. The thick smell of decomposition pervades my senses like a perfume, and under the low-piled clouds I kick my way through dense leaves, used condoms, tea-colored ferns, and tossed Black Cat cigarette packs, wearing a vivid blue cloak because I am Captain Marvel. I find a fragment of a letter in the ferns, but all I can make out in the rain-smeared writing are the words *Mike, it's been too long.* And I become obsessed with a man called Mike. Who is he? Who wrote this letter? Where are they now? What happened? I stand at the local bus shelter with sheets of rain obscuring everything and stare at women in the queue, wondering if one of them is the one who wrote those words.

Between the ages of seven and twelve the overpowering sense of nature makes me feel drunk, and in a future filled with electricity, lights, and loud music, it will linger like a sanctifying echo, a chord I used to know. After my mother switches out the lights I sit in bed with the Dr. Doolittle books and read by holding back the curtain, which lets in the flickering light of the lamppost from the street below. Inspired by his adventures, I begin collecting birds' eggs,

lizard skins, flowers, grasses, and weirdly shaped rocks. I make careful notes about these objects and look them up in my Observer's books. I fancy myself as Doolittle junior, a son of nature strolling through long grass with a pipe in my mouth. I pore over books about plants and animals and take to making long lists of names, which I give dimension by gluing lizard skin, bird feathers, and dead flowers onto pieces of cardboard until my bedroom becomes a personal museum and acquires a slightly strange smell.

As I pull myself closer and closer to these things both living and dead, the world—in my nascent imagination—becomes alive and vivid. Now, as if for the first time, I see it teeming with natural events, a connection between all things, a web, the underlying soul. *Animus mundi*.

A tragic moment occurs at the age of nine, when discarding Marvel's blue cape, I move into a Lash LaRue phase. Lash is a popular Western hero and features in a popular comic I read from cover to cover every week. In every story he escapes dire situations through his incredible ability with a bullwhip or his lash—hence the moniker. An inspiring figure, Lash dresses in black from head to toe, with a black eye mask and a broad stiff-rimmed black hat. With his whip and mask, he is the perfect embodiment of some kind of homoerotic fantasy that I am too young to comprehend.

Close to our house there is an apple orchard that contains a working beehive. Clothed in anything black I can find, and with my whip in hand, I decide one afternoon to see if I can emulate my hero by snaring the hive and pulling it to the ground. I creep through the long sun-dappled grass to spy on my target. Hiding behind a tree full of Granny Smiths, I calculate carefully. And then, raising the whip over my head like a king cobra, I strike and yell in triumph as the whip coils itself into a tight circle around the

buzzing cone. I give it a strong tug and it crashes down, releasing about fifty million venomous and pissed-off bees that rise like a thick black cloud. I drop the whip and run like a man on fire, but they are faster and I am stung, pierced, and penetrated in every available piece of exposed flesh and through my lash outfit until I reach home, sobbing and panting with a face like a swollen river. "Mum!" I scream. "I've been stung! I've been stung!"

Stuck at home, the only diversions being reading or listening to the radio, I become a fan of a show that thrills me and many of my friends at school. It's called *Journey into Space* and has four protagonists: Jet, Lemmy, Mitch, and Doc. It's a serial that's on every Tuesday night at eight o'clock. Heralded by the dramatic fanfare of a rocket blasting into space, a masculine voice intones the program tile and we pick up from where we left off last week. Usually the heroes are having a problem such as a control malfunction as they attempt to travel to the moon, and we crouch on the floor in front of the coal fire listening bug-eyed as our heroes grapple with martians, alien monsters, or a failed retro-rocket. As the show comes to an end my mum is standing there with a mug of Horlicks, telling me to get up the apples and pears. Stoned on the last half hour of space, stars, and planets, I stare at her in incomprehension. But I climb the stairs, calling out good night, and slide into bed to follow the adventures of Dan Dare and the Mekon in the *Eagle*, the yellowing flare of the streetlight through the crack in the curtains giving just enough light to ruin my eyes.

From time to time in the dream of life that spins from four to eleven years of age, there are points of gold—moments of completeness—the happiest of these times being when my parents take me to the cinema to see the latest film.

In the hours before the event—going to the pictures—there is always a sense of excitement in the house. My father disappears to fill the car with petrol while my mother rattles around in the kitchen to see that we have dinner before we leave. The phrase "What time does the big picture start?" becomes a mantra in our family. Finally we close the front door behind us. My mother squeezes into the car next to me, a cloud of perfume powder and makeup; my dad turns the ignition; and we lurch away from the wet curb toward the Moderne cinema. The tight confines of the car and the intoxicating haze of perfume combine with the leather seats and the smell of petrol to make the drive a voluptuous and sacred ritual.

Along with this heavenly bouquet comes my craving for chocolate. The dark brown stuff fills my head like a dark sea of unending pleasure, and as we pass through rain-filled streets with my dad cursing the faulty heater and wiping his hand across a befogged windscreen, I fantasize about it, dream of it, and plan to have so much of it one day that I will laugh out loud as I eat myself into a chocoholic coma.

But life for many young couples in postwar Britain is difficult and my parents have problems. "It's so hard to make ends meet," my mother will often say, as she washes another dish or darns another sock, and my dad never seems to be home because he is always working. A huge row between them one day ends in the kitchen with my mother sobbing and me on the floor with my arms around her legs, screaming, "Please don't cry, Mummy, please don't cry." The tension of trying to survive has an eroding effect on their marriage, and it breaks down. My younger brother and I are put into an orphanage for six months. We never see our mother, but Dad visits us on the weekends. We live with other kids in the top room of a

farmhouse building, where we sleep in two-tier bunks and ridicule one another with cruel remarks. My bunk lies near a window and through it I can see across several fields to a river in the distance, and as the stars climb into the sky I fall asleep with these rivers and meadows in my mind like a map to a beautiful place and I wonder if my mum will be there. One day Dad comes to collect us, telling us that she is back from the hospital and that it is time to go home. My brother and I ask him about the hospital, but he is vague and just mutters something about an operation. An hour later we are back in our own house with our own mother, who weeps and hugs us, and then we get on with teatime as if nothing had happened.

Through the bright and shadowed years of childhood the pop songs of the time—"Twenty Tiny Fingers (Twenty Tiny Toes)," "You're a Pink Tooth Brush, I'm a Blue Tooth Brush," or "How Much Is That Doggie in the Window"—fill my head like a tinny pink-colored soundtrack: the optimism of a world now under the shadow of the bomb. As if in some premonitory act, I lie in bed giving imaginary solo concerts by making twanging guitar sounds with my mouth, although I have never seen a real guitar. Eventually my mother insists that I take piano lessons, and a small upright is purchased for the front room, where she sits at my side each night making sure that I go through my scales and five-finger exercises.

Every Thursday evening around five I walk down the avenue to the house of Mrs. Thorne, the local piano teacher, who is supposed to be good if a little eccentric. "Practice, Andrew—practice," my mum says, and I drag myself to the lesson, filled with a deep desire to take off into the woods at the end of the street and chuck my spear at something. Mrs. Thorne—a throwback to Victorian England—wears small wire-rimmed glasses and has her hair cut

like an English schoolgirl with a clip in it; and to round it off, she wears long pink bloomers whose edges always poke out beneath the hemline of her skirts. She has a permanent cold—or so it appears—because she is forever sniffing and extracting a white hankie from her bloomers, blowing into it, and then stuffing it back into place. This act always faintly disgusts me—I imagine a line of transparent snot like a snail trail up her leg.

I play children's exercises and an odd assortment of simple pieces. The highlight, and usually the grand finale of the lesson, comes when we play a duet on the song "Wonderful Wonderful Copenhagen." I actually love this tune and don't mind playing it with the old dear because I've seen the film, which stars Danny Kaye, and adore it. So I go at it with considerable gusto and not much finesse because it is on this one song that I feel I can actually play the piano; knowing this, she always saves it for the end of the lesson so that I can go home feeling less dour about the whole thing.

The room we play in reeks of mothballs and is filled with overstuffed armchairs and pictures of dogs; on the piano is a framed color photo of the queen. There is a rumor on the street that Mrs. Thorne has actually composed music for the coronation. This is impressive, and we all vaguely wonder what she's doing in our part of the world, seeing as how she has written music for royalty.

Mrs. Thorne's husband, who is a conductor for the Hants and Dorset bus line, skulks about in the background. He is a short, stubby man with dark greasy hair, a unibrow, and very thick glasses that look like the ends of a couple of beer bottles.

One lovely summer evening as I am shutting the front door after the lesson and about to walk home, Mr. Thorne appears on the path beside me. At first I think it is the garden gnome come to

life but then realize it is the bus conductor. He smiles at me through stained English teeth and says, "Come with me, I want to show you something." Innocent as the first day of spring, I skip down the path behind him in the direction of the potting shed at the bottom of the garden.

The shed, with its pots, tools, bags of fertilizer, and smell of earth, is typical of the English garden. Dark and claustrophobic, it is the perfect spot for an Agatha Christie murder. *Maybe Mr. Thorne will show me some comics or a train set,* I think, but after a little preamble of showing me the serrated edge of a hacksaw, he produces a large leather belt and asks me to whip him. "Whip you?" I say, my cornflower eyes wide and innocent as Bambi's. "Why?" He stares at me through his beer-bottle lenses and grunts something about deserving it and come on, be a good boy. I notice that his face is flushed, I don't understand it, but I also can't see anything wrong with it if that's what he wants. Mr. Thorne bends over the bench and asks me again with a small sob in his voice to give it to him. So with a puzzled idea in my head and a momentary glimpse of Lash LaRue, I let him have it. He tells me to do it harder, so I oblige, giving him a good half a dozen strokes, feeling like Captain Bluebeard in the process. Then he thanks me and I trot off home, dragging my hand through the hedges at the side of the road and whistling the Danny Kaye song and looking forward to beans on toast. The event recedes like a summer tide; I don't say anything to my parents or consider that I might put a man away for life but continue happily on thumping away at "Wonderful Wonderful Copenhagen."

BRIDGEHAMPTON, AUGUST 18, 1983

I pull on a pair of shorts and head down to the kitchen. The house is still quiet; I realize that for some odd reason I am

up before everyone else. The kitchen in the mansion is a vast, complicated affair with massive refrigerators and freezers unlike anything you would see in an English house, and I wonder if it is going to be possible to make coffee. But miraculously some gentle Maria has prepared the way and there in a gleaming new coffeepot is the lifesaving java, ready to kick-start the flesh robot.

I pour out a large mug and then search around for a spoon to stir the milk. Spoon—spoon, where are you hiding? I grunt and tug open a recalcitrant drawer to see if there is any sign of the implement in this labyrinth of kitchenware—surely it's somewhere. I see that beneath the gleaming silver cutlery the drawer is lined with a red-and-white-checked material, like my mum had, and I see a small boy walking into his mother's kitchen wearing a gas mask and asking for bread and butter and his mother with her copper hair in a bun wiping the suds from her arms. Ignoring the beastly visage and staring out the high window at the mass of clouds piling up over the green fields, she replies, "You know where it is, dear . . ."

I wake up from my reverie and take a large gulp of coffee. I'm hungry, but everything is behind cupboard doors and it's too early yet for the professional help. I cross the kitchen and start opening doors in the quest for food. Finding a large tin, I pull the lid off. It is packed with Danish pastries, all individually wrapped in plastic. Perfect. I fancy a sugar rush. I take one over to the table and begin taking off the plastic. There is a picture of the Little Mermaid on the front and an inscription that reads, "Anderson, the Best of Denmark," and as I bite into the soft

dough a melody like a siren call floats into my brain: "Wonderful Wonderful Copenhagen."

Nursing my coffee and feeling like an extra from *The Night of the Living Dead,* I walk into the lounge. The owner keeps a small baby grand in this room, and we all plunk away on it at different times. I stick my coffee mug on a piece of sheet music on top of the piano and twiddle at a few high notes. I play fragments of "Take Five" by Dave Brubeck and then try to turn it into "Straight, No Chaser" by Monk and then into a series of descending thirteenth chords from Duke Ellington. Anytime I play this progression it takes me back to the dusty and noisy assembly hall at Summerbee, when I was eleven years old.

One day we are all gathered in the school hall for something or other and Mr. Furneaux, our music teacher, is idly playing a beautiful sequence of harmonies on the piano unlike anything I've ever heard him play before. It hits me right in the solar plexus and wakes me as if from a dream, and like a moth to the flame I go over to ask what it is that he is playing. " 'Sophisticated Lady' by Duke Ellington," he answers without lifting his fingers from the keyboard. Neither name means much to me, but the chord progression creates a strange new excitement in my gut. I don't understand it—but whatever it is, I am hooked and want more.

Mr. Furneaux is a short, bald-headed man who wears tweed jackets and always has a pipe sticking up out of his breast pocket like a flag waving a truce at the oncoming horde. Classes with him are scenes of madness as he tries desperately to get us—a mob of rowdy little shits—to sing songs like "English Country Garden" or some other piece of Victoriana like "Nymphs and Shepherds," on

which we are supposed to sing descant parts but which the whole class deliberately sings off-key so that it sounds like a roomful of rabid dogs. I actually feel some pain for Mr. Furneaux during this mayhem because somehow, in a way I can't articulate, I want to make music.

At age eleven I begin listening to the AFN radio station, which plays American jazz. One day Mr. Furneaux—who now regards me somewhat differently, maybe as an island in a sea of lunacy—asks me to stand up in class and talk about my interest in jazz as an example to the other miscreants (at least when it comes to music). I actually like this, and drop the names of Django Reinhardt, Radio Luxembourg, and Ellington with a bigheaded teacher's-pet smugness. After I sit down, Mr. Furneaux makes a couple of remarks to the class that maybe some of them could take a leaf from my book and take a genuine interest in music. I feel rather pleased with myself but also slightly apprehensive, knowing that I will probably get a kicking from the heavies after class. My best bet to avoid the pain is to be first out the door and piss off down the corridor before they get their hands on me, and surreptitiously I slide over a couple of desks.

Though the spiritual side of life slowly fills with music, the words of the Holy Bible fall on stony ground. Classes in religious instruction are anarchy beyond even the twisted behavior of the music class. Our teacher is Miss Jones, a minute Welsh lady with periwinkle blue eyes and hair tied up in a bun. Her entering the classroom is the signal for the ructions that start with a loud simulated fart, followed by a long period of people gasping for breath, choking, opening and shutting windows, lying on the floor and asking for first aid, etc. During this profane moment poor Miss Jones stands very still and fixes her eyes on some distant horizon as

if seeing the fabled green hill itself; remarkably, after a while the very weirdness of her trancelike presence stills us. She then asks us in a very quiet voice to open our books to a Bible story, and once again the class erupts into hooligan antics and loud boos with off-color remarks about Jesus stabbing at the air. At this delinquent point Miss Jones goes down on her knees in the center of the classroom and begins to pray, but this doesn't help; in fact, if anything, it increases the violence in the classroom. The poor woman now rushes out of the room and to the headmaster's office and returns with him to a classroom that now is as quiet as a church, with the students' heads bent in diligent reverence over their books.

Once a year a physical fitness display is organized for the parents, to show the progenitors of the mob that when the fruit of their loins aren't actually in the bogs smoking or having a punch-up, they are being kept in good enough condition to go on to a life of meaningless labor in England's green and pleasant land. This display involves testicle-threatening handsprings over wooden horses and rapid climbing of ropes, which always causes an erection to rise cheerfully in one's skimpy shorts.

And then there are the dreaded boxing matches. Being an innate coward, I normally avoid anything to do with punching, but one year to my horror I am chosen to fight not one but two other kids, Smith and Evans. Smith is actually smaller and runtier than I am, so I breathe a sigh of relief when I hear his name; but Evans is a mean little Welsh boy who already has a reputation on the playground for a vicious fighting style, and at the thought of it I'm ready to crap in my pants.

On the night of the fight I go into the ring against Smith first, and it's like slapping a baby. I just slug the poor little sod senseless and then feel really terrible about it as he thanks me for the fight

with his nose spurting blood and his eye closing up, and I mumble something about better luck next time. Evans is next, and now buoyed by the death blows I have just dealt, I feel confident that I can take the Welsh boy. Wrong—dead wrong.

Evans shoots out from his corner like a dog with its tail on fire and smacks me straight in the mouth. I reel back, my eyes filling with salt and my face stinging. I stagger after him as he nimbly bounces away, bobbing and weaving in front of me with a taunting look on his face. Bastard, I have to hit him; in fact, I want to kill him. But I can't get near him as he twirls past me like a marionette and slugs my right ear, which explodes like a meteor shower. My arms flail like a windmill in empty space, and I sob in frustration—he simply isn't there. Punches rain down on me like winter hailstones, pain and humiliation flood my soul, jeering laughter fills my head. It's endless, and I have wild thoughts of the priesthood—anything, anywhere, that is peaceful and away from this incessant hellish pounding.

A bell rings off in some distant place and I think it might be a nice old church bell or something, but it is the chime that signifies Evans's smirking and beastly triumph over me. I crawl from the ring like a whipped dog and a strong sense of the audience's schadenfreude. After the beating I limp home with some friends. Do I perceive hints of pity? Do I see faint smiles? We talk casually about giving Evans a collective bashing, but in the end we do nothing about it, probably because we think he could take the lot of us.

As members of the academic stream, we are privileged to receive a somewhat different style of teaching than the moron scum in the forms below us. English literature, for example, in its relaxed and

conversational style, is run like a club for insiders. Our teacher, Miss James—an oasis of sanity and reason in a school that seems to be filled with psychotic, deranged, and sexually perverse teachers—is about seventy years old, dresses in tweed suits, covers her hair with a net, and speaks to us in the plummy tones of the aristocracy. I find her considerable enthusiasm for literature and the English language contagious, and whatever assignments she sets us are a pleasure rather than dull homework. A real teacher like Miss James is an accomplice as you discover parts of yourself at an early age, and although I am already a committed reader, this dear old lady stokes the fire.

We voyage through the plots of *Jude the Obscure, The Mayor of Casterbridge, Far from the Madding Crowd,* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, all of which have a resonance since they are written by Thomas Hardy, who might be termed a local. The pessimism of these books doesn't put me off. Enthralled by characters like Jude, Michael Henchard, and Sue Bridehead, and by the fragility of their relationships, I begin waking up to what appears to me a view of the world that is real. My mother also loves Hardy and has read all the novels, and suddenly we are able to talk about something that seems light-years from childhood. A few miles away the green hills of Dorset—the setting for Hardy's stories—take on a new significance. We study other literature with Miss James, but it is the tragedy of Jude, the travails of Michael Henchard, the adventures of Tess and Sergeant Troy that get me, come in like a dark knot and never leave.

To get to school, I have to trudge for two miles through a shady wood that seems to hold about two hundred homosexual men on a daily basis. In these benighted days in Britain the love that dare not speak its name is still deeply in the closet and regarded as a crime

against nature. The term *gay* still means happy, carefree spirits and crinoline doilies à la Jane Austen, not yet the perfectly greased six-packs, San Francisco bathhouses, Zapata mustaches, and flashing muscle. If you are gay at this time, you are queer or ginger or nancy or a turd burglar, and you had better keep your identity hidden or risk not only being ostracized from "decent" society but also a prison term to boot, and many a day in yonder wood do I see a pink upraised willy twirling at me from behind a stout oak. They are usually pale middle-aged men who look lonely and no doubt will run like a frightened rabbit if challenged. Sometimes they trail behind us in the distance, dodging behind bushes and trying to work up the courage to unleash their spinnakers into the fresh spring air.

Each morning between eight-thirty and nine the entire school joins together in the assembly hall. We hear remarks about the supposed progress of the school, followed by a short Bible reading, and then we sing a couple of hymns before trudging off to our various classes. In the fifth form we stand in a shabby line at the back of the hall. We hate the hymn-singing part of assembly, and just as we did with Mr. Furneaux, deliberately sing as off-key as possible, pissing ourselves while doing so. It's a cacophonous racket and we do it as a matter of habit, thinking that no one can detect where it's coming from. One morning after the headmaster, a miserable old bastard named Mr. Legg, has advised us all to "hitch our wagon to a star," I for some reason get called up to the stage where I stand while the last hymn is sung. With the strains of "Jerusalem" echoing around the hall, I am filled with abject horror as I hear the caterwauling coming from the back row where I normally stand. It is loud, clear, awful, and desperately obvious who the culprits—my mates—are; I cringe and gain a new respect for

the teachers who either have an excellent sense of humor or are tone-deaf.

A couple of months after my twelfth birthday, I am at the front of a line of kids waiting to go into class. Everyone is pushing and shoving and being stupid until suddenly the line surges and I get pushed through the door, which is made of glass. I push out my arms to save myself but go straight through the glass, shattering it in all directions. I hit the ground with blood pumping at warp speed from my right hand, all of its fingers now slashed open. I scream and scream, cry out for my mother, and eventually get raced off to the emergency ward, where everything is sewn back together and I live—but for the rest of my life with a right hand full of scarred fingers.

Somewhere in the middle of these chaotic days of inky pages and military-style school thrashings, I get the faint idea that I have a thing for music, an ear for it maybe, but no way in which to express it other than enthusiastic talk and humming the day's idiotic songs—the piano lessons now having faded because of my getting a pair of roller skates. But shortly after my thirteenth birthday things change when I am given a guitar by my uncle Jim.

Jim has recently returned to England after years of living in Africa. Because of his exploits he has a somewhat legendary status in our family, having lived with actual Africans, shot at lions, and been down the diamond mines. When I was six he sent me a present of a book called *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo,* a story of some wild lions that attack a camp in Kenya. Thrilled by the vision of flesh being ripped by wild cats, I love it and wonder if Uncle Jim has ever seen one, a lion.

One day he comes over and says, "Come 'ere a minute, I've got something for you." He stares down at me, his face brown and

furrowed by years under the African sun, and from a battered case he pulls out an old and beaten Spanish guitar and says, "What do you think about this—I had it in Africa—would you like it?" My heart almost stops because to me it is complicated and exotic—a fabulous machine. He passes it to me and I feel a rush of blood as I whisper, "Thank you, Uncle," and carry it into my bedroom as if trying not to drop an egg. Scratched and dented with a string missing, it isn't much of an instrument, but I love it instantly and sit on the edge of the bed with it cradled in my arms, holding it in the position that I have seen used by guitarists on TV. I study it and gaze at its dents and scratches, its evidence of a long life, and wonder how many songs have been played on it, where it's been. It is an immediate bond, and possibly in that moment there is a shift in the universe because this is the moment, the point from which my life unfolds. I strike the remaining strings, which make a sound like slack elastic. It's horribly out of tune and I don't know even the simplest chord, but to me it is the sound of love.

It may be the sound of love, but with no idea of how to tune it and even less idea of how to play it, I don't know how to put one foot or finger in front of another. But Providence is at hand in the shape of a six-foot-seven ex-RAF serviceman by the name of David Ellis, a lodger my parents have recently taken into the house. We call him Cloudy because he literally towers over the rest of us, and we like to ask him how the weather is up there, but he's a genial personality and luckily for me a musician: a pianist. He immediately sees my plight and remedies the situation by returning one day with a new set of strings and a chord book with instructions on how to tune the guitar.

I watch, fascinated, as he wrestles the strings onto the guitar and proceeds to tune it to the family piano. He then hands me the

guitar and asks me to try out a D7 chord as shown on page one of the book, a simple triangle shape. With the guitar now in tune, the chord comes out sounding like heaven and I laugh in amazement as if I have received a surprise kiss at a party. I try some of the other shapes, like E, A, and B7. At first it's slow and painful—this being the last moment in my life when my fingers will be without calluses—but I become obsessed and manfully struggle on into the night as the guitar gradually detunes itself and slides from the sound of an angel's harp to the moan of hell. Cloudy comes to the rescue and brings the strings up to pitch again. We go on like this for a couple of weeks until I slowly get my fingers around the open-position chords and learn to tune to the piano. I'm shaky and nervous but, taking a deep breath, decide to make an appearance at school with my guitar.

A few years earlier you would never have seen something as exotic as a guitar, but now it's beginning to establish its iconic presence as the trenchant symbol of youth. I notice a few other kids in the playground showing off to small groups during the morning or afternoon break and I start by joining these little throngs and looking over shoulders at the hands of the other boys as they form strange little triangles and parallelograms on the necks of their guitars. After school as I stumble home through the woods past the familiar trees, rotting logs, and spirals of pussy willow, I try to memorize these configurations, holding my left hand in the air, fingers clustered in three points against the dark wet greenness.

At first I am shy because I now have a new identity and have to grow into it like a new skin. I expect a certain amount of snideness from the playground yobs, but because I have given myself time to get at least the first few chords down, it goes smoothly, with a minimum of jeering, and I become one of the kids with a guitar.