
Opening Extract from...

On the Road

Growing Up in Eight Journeys – My Early Years

Written by Richard Hammond

Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

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Weidenfeld & Nicolson
LONDON

First published in Great Britain in 2013
by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN-978 02978 6943 6

TPB-978 02978 6944 3

Typeset by Input Data Services Ltd, Bridgwater, Somerset

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Weidenfeld & Nicolson

The Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House
5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane
London, WC2H 9EA
www.orionbooks.co.uk

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To Mum and Dad for putting up with me on the bigger journey covered by this book and to my brothers Nicholas and Andrew who shared some of it. And to Mindy, my wife, for accepting the tattered remnants into her life. And to Izzy and Willow, setting out on their own roads.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should acknowledge people here because it took many of them to make writing this book possible. Mum, Dad, Nick and Andy, of course. And Mindy because, well, you always acknowledge your wife in this bit. Oh, and my agent, Luigi and publisher, Alan. Smashing chaps, thank you. But mostly, recognition should go to me for writing the bloody thing. It took ages, I mean AGES.

PROLOGUE

I want to explain myself before you read this book. Well, maybe that's what this book is about: explaining how I became the grown-up (ish) me. The journeys I'm talking about here are not big, heroic ones; there are no glaciers crossed, deserts trudged through or menacing jungle-passes conquered. All that came later for me. First I had to grow up. We all do. In this book I cycle to school aged eleven, or walk to work on a potato farm at fourteen or drive my first car home from Harrogate. In each instance, the journey represents another step on the longer journey towards adulthood from childhood. I think we've all made these journeys in the same bigger journey. These are the journeys where the travelling was not an end in itself, and even the actual end, when it comes down to it, was pretty inconsequential. And that's the point of the book. If you're riding a bicycle to the dentist across town then you're hardly likely to be too distracted by the scenery or the trials and tribulations of the journey. So what will be turning over in your mind as you go?

The journeys don't form us; we are forming as we travel.

And recounting those travels offers an insight into who we were at each stage along the way from child to adult. Writing about them has felt like sneaking up on myself, catching my younger mind relaxed and un-self-conscious. And I've been able to mine it for what was really turning round in there at each stage through my childhood and into adulthood. I'd forgotten the magical, riotous grip of a comic until I let myself be transported back thirty-five years to an endless drive in the family car to a holiday in Weston-super-Mare. I'd forgotten how important the close texture of a car seat can be, or the complex messages sent out by a young boy's choice of bicycle. I'd forgotten the teenage passions and anger that rejoiced in the piercing yell of my first motorcycle and pressed me to drive my first car on the road from Harrogate to Ripon just as crazily, selfishly and dangerously as the young lunatics I shout at today, as a middle-aged man.

You will have your own journeys, those moments when you can sneak up on your own past self and pry into your own head to see what was going on. Try it.

Journey 1 Will I ever ‘see the sea’?

SOLIHULL TO WESTON-SUPER-MARE, 1978

The long, long drive to the seaside. I was eight, the car was ancient and the journey would take forever and ever.

Rain-streaked windows, the smell of sour milk, dreams of comic-strip heroes and adventures in the dunes. Are we there yet?

NOTHING will ever take so long . . .

8

It's a special, crushing, desperate kind of agony. And it feels like it will never end as the journey goes on and on and on and on and on. And there is no sense of it being a journey, with a beginning a middle and an end; a child's mind knows just an endless middle that starts as soon as the family car backs out of the drive. The distant end of the journey is a goal as unimaginable and unreachable as adulthood.

'We're off,' Dad would shout when we set off and briefly, for an infinitesimally short snap of firework time, we would be overjoyed, my brothers and I. We were off; the adventure was beginning. Our car was a magical space-ship, a Tardis that would transport us from our familiar, schoolday, Sunday-best Solihull with its parades of shops and cul-de-sacs and gates and over-under garage doors and the corner plots and cherry trees and white-flecked tarmac drives and all the infinite and subtle, grudging cues of suburban status and take us to the sparkling

excitement of the seaside with promises of exotic foods, beaches, buckets, spades, waves, piers and carnival parades of brightly coloured painted-metal posts-and-chains running along the sand-strewn promenades overlooking the wide stretches of beach. Hidden among the stiff, waving grasses of the rolling dunes armies lay in wait, ready to leap out to ambush us and many-eyed monsters hid beneath the sand knowing already in their dreadful, gnarled heads that we would hunt and dig and crush them.

My dad's parents lived in Weston-super-Mare and the journey there was a regular pilgrimage to see them. Regular but by no means often enough to please me and my two brothers or, I suspect, my nanna and grandpa who had sold up in their native Birmingham and moved there before I was born. They lived in a house near a corner opposite a church that we could see from the window of the room where we all three were put to bed, though seldom to sleep. On the ground floor of the house, behind a plain, hollow door, was Grandpa's serious surgery where he kept the chromed and dangerous tools of his work as a chiropodist. I don't know how he came to be a chiropodist. It's not something someone is born to. His career to that point had encompassed a spectacularly eclectic array of roles, from farm worker, truck driver, department-store food-buyer, through the terrors of bomb disposal work in the war and on to boarding house owner, chiropodist and cake-shop proprietor.

From a time barely scratched into my memory, they lived next to the cake shop that smelled of marzipan and icing. Sometimes Nanna would give us tiny decorative fruit made of marzipan, a delicacy of such rareness and value that eating them would have us squirming with a mixture of guilt and pleasure that would only become familiar again much later as we grew to be teenagers giving in to all the many guilty pleasures suddenly available to us then. Dad told me that Nanna once found a snake under the counter in the cake shop and had to carry on serving customers and pretending that nothing was wrong while calling Grandpa out of the side of her mouth to come and deal with it. That was the sort of thing that happened to Nanna and Grandpa, and one of the reasons we loved to visit them.

In the happy living room of the house with the chiropodist's surgery they had an ashtray on a tall, corkscrewed wooden stand and they would let us sit on the sofa and use it as a steering wheel in an imaginary car. I looked forward to the ashtray steering wheel as much as I looked forward to the early morning walks with Dad and Grandpa and my brothers along sand-scuffed streets past the quietest houses we could imagine to the paper shop that smelled of bread and sweets and glittered with bright, plastic seaside temptations that we looked at longingly but knew not to nag Dad to buy because he hated – and still hates – materialism. A child whining at their parent for a toy in a gift

shop was a sight so disgusting it could send our whole clan scurrying out to the street, full of sadness and shame for ever having walked in.

Grandpa's car had the best-sounding indicator in the world. It was, I think, an Austin Avenger, and it made the most delicate and musical yet important noise, 'bink-a-bink-a-bink-a', as he tilted the lever to navigate us round the busy seaside town. Many years later, when age had robbed his warm and gentle nature of some of its reactions and instincts, he was obliged to hand in his driving licence; while my dad wrestled with what he knew was a terrible and undignified loss for his own father, I mourned the loss of the familiar 'bink-a-bink-a-bink' in Grandpa's Avenger as we turned out past the church and set off for Bristol or the tiny Monk's Rest café that sat on top of a hill so steep that his car or any other car in the world, even a Ferrari or a Rolls-Royce or a Cadillac from the TV would struggle to make the ascent.

★ ★ ★

The transportation to my grandparents and this other world by the sea was not instant. Before we reached the end of our road the grey realisation would sink in and dominate our every childish thought. It was miles. And miles. And miles. A sort of panic rose up in me at the prospect. There would be arguments. That was a cold, dull

fact. They hovered over the road ahead like storm clouds we must drive under. Dad would be forced to intervene and quell those arguments, to quash our boyish, riotous energies and stop them bursting out of the car in a multi-coloured shower of sparks. Having pushed Dad to the point of no return, we would sit quietly for a while, each lost in his own thoughts until the boredom could be contained no longer. It would leak out of us in tiny squeaks at first, building to a crescendo as one of us fought back verbally, stung into action at being squashed into the seat or by some whispered accusation levelled with laser-guided precision by a smirking sibling aiming for a nerve still raw from some earlier battle. We couldn't help it.

It must have been hell for our parents. On becoming a father I took a solemn vow that I would never allow my children's back seat riots to rattle me. I would remain calm and distant up front; a stoic, silent driver responsible only for the captaincy of his vehicle. And it worked … Better still, perhaps as a result of being denied the buffer of my impotent fury to push against, my daughters don't fight in the car; they sit in companionable silence, lost in their books, or chat lightly, earnestly and intelligently. Or maybe it's because they are two girls and not three boys. I have never told my father this. It would, I suspect, make him grind his teeth a bit.

When we weren't arguing and fighting, we sang. The whole family did. We sang together and for hours on the

long road to Weston, past the familiar landmarks and along the up-and-down bit where the carriageways of the infant M5 split – one direction elevated and affording travellers a lofty view across trees and fields, while the poor souls heading home to Birmingham skulked in the shadow of those whose holidays in the watery sun had yet to unfold.

I can remember the songs. My parents were folk singers – still are, in fact – and we worked up numbers from their repertoire as resident performers at the Bell and Pump folk club in the 1960s. We were familiar with 'Pretty Nancy of Yarmouth' and we sang of the 'long and fond letters' written to her by a sailor telling of his travels and adventures. We three boys knew the earthy urgency with which sportsmen were urged to arise, because 'the morning is clear and the larks are singing all in the air'. We sang and listened to our parents sing about workers in the huge gas plants at Birmingham or winding in ships' anchors or downing brown, foaming beer. And there were nonsense songs too:

Be kind to your web-footed friends
For that duck may be somebody's mother.
She lives in a swamp all alone,
where the weather is always down.

Now you may think that this is the end.
Well it is [*huge, dramatic pause*]

no it isn't, there's some more yet.
We'll start and we'll sing it again,
only this time a little bit lower.

And we would sing it again, a little bit lower each time, until our bright, childish voices dropped out of their register and could no longer reach down to join the impossibly deep, rich notes our dad would send reverberating through the car. No matter though, because we'd then substitute 'lower' with 'higher' on the last line until we were squeaking like mice. And then we'd repeat the song, finishing on the word 'quieter' or, best of all, 'louder' until we were roaring and laughing and shrieking loud enough to shake the car windows out of their frames and worry the people in the car next to us if they saw our red faces contorted as we screamed louder and louder and louder, the inevitable competition to be the loudest spreading like a brush fire through the three siblings cramped on to the vinyl back seat of the little grey Anglia.

When I first told my wife about these journeys and our singing, she cringed a little on my behalf. Embarrassed. But now my daughters sing in the car. They sing solo and together and my wife and I sing with them. Loudly. Pop songs. Rock songs. Nonsense songs. They have no video screens back there. They might listen to a song on their iPod briefly, but that only serves as a prompt for another number to share with us. Then we all join in and laugh

and sing and scream until passers-by and other drivers must stare and wonder about the four red faces straining for the top notes and grimacing when Daddy howls out of tune. I thank my parents for that. I really do.

★ ★ ★

Did cars have a stronger smell in those days or did our small noses, unclogged by age and experience and a million cigarettes and traffic jams work better? The Anglia smelled of burned petrol and smoke and vinyl and sour milk and hairspray. Windows have a particular smell if you sit with your head resting against one for long enough. Maybe it's the glass or some element within it. As the cat's eyes swooshed by and I dreamed of real cats lying in holes in the road, their eyes lighting the way, the familiar car smell washed over me until I didn't notice it and became absorbed into it.

The car lurched and squeaked over mysterious dark patches of road, like patches on a quilt, while the lampposts marched past in their millions. On night-time journeys I could let myself be hypnotised by the blazing, fiery archways of yellow light guiding us thousands of miles towards the sea. But today we travelled in the afternoon and nothing could alleviate the endless, grey grind of it as we wound our way on.

There were games as well as songs. Officially too old at nine for 'I Spy', I was still happy to let myself be drawn

into it in the car, the game made excusable because there were adults involved. We competed to be first to spot a yellow car or a lorry or a phone box or a sheep. And we talked too. We talked about life, about places, about animals. We made up games where you would have to name something, an animal or town or whatever, beginning with each consecutive letter of the alphabet. A was always Aardvark. And Z was always Zebra. If you got those letters there was no point saying it out loud but no point looking for alternative answers because we couldn't think of any. We talked about death too. Children are fascinated with the subject. On one lengthy discussion about the longest forms of death, started by us morbid, gruesome little boys in the back seat, I argued that life, when you thought about it, was the longest form of death. I think my parents were a bit shocked by that one. I thought it was great and made me sound awfully clever and deep.

★ ★ ★

I'm reporting from a different planet. The world of a small child on a long car journey is a whole different world to the one you and I live in now. The surface of the seat, worn shiny and stretched by age is important, its texture the subject of intense and close study. There are tiny dimples in this apparently smooth surface and only I have spotted them. Staring at it, I can imagine it is the landscape of the

moon and I am a spaceman in his ship, cruising over it. Or I am a scientist and this thing that only I have seen is important and must be examined. But the study makes me feel sick. I hate the way the vinyl sticks to the backs of my legs. There are lines across it where the panels are joined and the ridges leave imprints on my legs. It is impossible to sit comfortably for long, even with my young limbs. I can feel the springs through the thin vinyl. The car bounces and sits restlessly on other, bigger springs, great rusty ones, slung just under where I sit. The axle grinds between them. There is machinery down there, important, heavy, dark, unseen machinery doing its job like the engine of a ship. I close my eyes and imagine it working: spinning and pumping and sweating with oil.

There's a hazy smell of sour milk. My brother spilled it once. Or threw it up. Whatever, the event is lost in forgotten family history, but the smell remains, familiar to us all and as physically present as another passenger in the car with us. We don't even mention it any more but we never, ever take milk in the car; it's become one of Dad's rules. I feel sick now and open my eyes. I once tried reading in the car. That didn't work. It made me feel really, really sick. Comics are better; you can look at the pictures and it doesn't make you feel sick, but I don't have a comic. I get *Whizzer and Chips* sometimes. For a while it used to be delivered on a Saturday along with the papers for Dad. I don't have one now. I wish I did. I'll try to imagine

what Sid's snake, Slippy, would do to liven things up. I can imagine him hissing his way from the back seat to the front, popping up between Mum and Dad with his red tongue sticking out, a vivid 'V' as he hisses and surprises them. Mum's curly hair would stand up in the air, straight. I imagine Sweet Tooth sitting next to me, his baby eyes big and round and his huge front teeth covered in candy. I like the word 'candy', it's more grown up than 'sweets', the word that we use. I try drawing my own comics sometimes, but it's not easy. The characters never come out like I see them in my mind. I would try and draw some now, if I had a pencil and paper with me on the seat.

I try Different Positions to Get Comfortable. After a while, I find one, a Comfortable Position. But inevitably something happens; I sit up to look out of the window, or move to scratch an itch where my sock has ground into my ankle, and then I can't find it, my Comfortable Position.

The car drones on. I have a headache. It's grey and heavy. I hate headaches. You can't escape them; they get you right where you live. If it's an ache in your knee or your foot, you can try and push it away from you, but if it's in your head, then you're stuck in there with it, like being in a lift with a crocodile. The world outside is dull and no longer tempting. I can no longer imagine running, being free, seeing grass, hearing water, laughing. I don't want to whine to my parents; I must be grown up and responsible. I am the eldest brother.

Will it NEVER END? I fold up into the corner, squashing myself into the seat and jamming my head against the side of the car, below the hard, vibrating window. I study the ashtray in the door. There is a red piece of Lego in it: a square brick, three-by-two dimples on top. I wish I could play with Lego in the car. But you can't. The pieces get lost and whatever you are trying to make gets broken and it makes you feel sick.

It is my turn to sit on the outside at the moment. That's why I can lean against the side of the car. Soon it will be my turn to migrate into the middle of the seat where there is nothing to lean against and you sit upright with your head lolling forwards, your chin not quite resting against your chest until your neck feels like it will never, ever be straight again. My brother is suffering that right now. He is pretending to be asleep. I don't think he is, but it would be unfair to wake him if he really is, so I stay quiet. I try to luxuriate in my corner, appreciate it while I have it. But I can't.

I look forward, past Dad's head in front of me, his hair thin and straight on the back of his neck, and I stare through the fly-streaked windscreen at the grey motorway advancing on us. Does he Get Bored when he's driving? Mum doesn't. She sits alongside him, looking out of the window and sometimes talking softly and smiling with him. They talk grown-up stuff. I can't think of anything to say. And I don't want to wake my brothers, who probably aren't asleep but might be.

We pass under a narrow, lopsided motorway bridge, taller than any other on the journey. It slants across the road, higher on one side than the other, with a rocky cliff face supporting the high side. I know the bridge, it is familiar. And it is hours and hours and hours from Weston. There is Nothing to Do and I am BORED.

We are living for one moment, all of us in this car. We are living for the moment when one of us announces that We Are There. The cry will go up: 'I Can See the Sea!' And we will all sit up and chatter and stretch and talk and plan and look at the familiar sights, welcome signs that the journey is over. It started as a competition, being the first to See the Sea, but nobody ever cares or remembers who is first to see it. We shout the words because it means We Are There and that's all that matters. Soon there will be squash in the bright plastic beakers with big white spots on them and Nanna's individual sponge cakes in tiny paper wrappers and Grandpa's white hair and big smile and seagulls shouting 'hi!' outside and the ashtray steering wheel and the long string light-pull hanging down over the big double bed that we use as a punchbag or to play a kind of tennis with until we are told to pipe down and go to sleep. But we don't, we whisper and play on until the noise rises once more and we are told we really have to be quiet. And then it is morning and the seagulls are calling outside the window with the chilly church and the paper shop. And all of that is as distant as the moon and it kind of upsets me

to think about it, makes a panic feeling rise in my chest and everything is worse and I wish I hadn't thought about it but it's too late now because I have and I squirm a bit and lose my Comfortable Position again.

I think I'm sleeping now. Or dozing. Maybe I'm dozing. But how do you know? And if you know, doesn't that mean that you can't be dozing? Now I know I'm not sleeping or dozing. I think I might be comfortable again now though. Except my left leg is starting to buzz with pins and needles. If you stay still for too long, they always come, the pins and needles. And sometimes their buzzing becomes unbearable. Why does that happen? Do grown-ups get pins and needles? I'll think about being grown up for a bit. How does it feel? Do they get bored? How do you know what you want to do as a grown-up? And what will I do? I'd like to do something exciting, something brave, something that will amaze people. Maybe I'll be an artist and draw comics. I'd love to do that. People would see my comics, see the characters I have created and admire them and laugh, and that would feel amazing. Maybe I can sleep after all. Maybe I'll be a spaceman. Somebody has to be, and it would be so exciting, up there … away from everything … king of the world …

And a part of me, sometimes, is still there on the back seat, waiting to See the Sea.