

THE CONVERSION OF RUSCOE ROBINSON

by DAVID JOHN GRIFFIN

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A forest can be a fragrant sanctuary of relaxation, a retreat for contemplation amidst its tranquillity — or else a dangerous foe, a hate-filled place to avoid before it engulfs you...

Sebastian and his friend from the city mounted their bikes when they had reached the lane. Assuming Ruscoe was following, Sebastian set off with enthusiasm through the archway of mossy boughs. He was glad of cooler air over his hot limbs.

He passed the churchyard with headstones crumbling and copper trunks of beech in groves. A gentle incline led to open fields. Pasture and lush slopes beyond the river were saturated with summer. The farmer had reached the picnic area at the margin of the forest before looking back to see Ruscoe several minutes away. Sebastian enjoyed the sun and watched grazing sheep for a while with a professional interest.

He had not seen his university companion of old for a year. Yet since arriving that morning, Ruscoe had acted as a stranger; or worse, as if he bore a grudge. Though piqued by this unusual behaviour and puzzled by the change in his comrade, Sebastian had refused to react. He would not pry but wait to be confided in, being mild-mannered and fond of his friend. ‘The chap’s eccentric, that’s all; too many brain

cells,' Sebastian had concluded.

From a distance, Ruscoe Robinson was perceived as remembered: dignified albeit lanky as he marched with a purposeful gait, a scribble of hair, and intelligent, probing eyes. But as the skinny man neared, Sebastian saw again crucial changes twelve months had made. Ruscoe stooped with shoulders hunched (although pushing a bicycle in the oppressive heat did not help his posture); and his unruly hair had turned grey and patchy. Those eyes – which once seemed to examine the soul – appeared dull and lifeless.

He arrived gasping and shakily patted his perspiring forehead. Then he removed his backpack to take from it a carton of drink and sunglasses.

Sebastian studied his distressed friend with concern — seeing wasted muscles through Ruscoe's tight clothing, his drawn face turned pink and puffy, with eyebrows frowning and covered then by the dark lenses.

'Chain came off,' Ruscoe stated before holding out the oily palm of a hand as if in proof. He gulped draughts of liquid from the carton.

Intense work has exhausted him, made him ill even, Sebastian guessed.

'Are you sure you're alright? We can go back to the farmhouse if you prefer.'

Ruscoe seemed to brighten.

'No problem, I've come this far —'

Rather than continue along the lane, they decided to ride at a gentle pace through the forest. Despite the atmosphere there being a refreshing tranquilliser, this holiday was no more than a nasty medicine to Ruscoe: a necessary though

unenjoyable experience.

The afternoon grew older. The pair had stopped by a large elm tree.

‘Good exercise!’ Sebastian uttered earnestly. ‘Well my friend, worn out yet?’

Ruscoe answered with an unexpected breathy monotone, as though three words were an effort to produce.

‘I . . . think . . . so’, he managed to say.

Upon meeting the farmer again after wearisome months in the city, Ruscoe had wanted desperately to hug Sebastian and to thank him for his hospitality. But he had been unable to, for he was trapped in a cage behind those tortured eyes, with his body made of unfeeling sponge. He had taken more prescribed tablets a few hours ago. Certainly he had taken too many — but rather that than not enough, he believed. At least he was not quaking. He looked up to see Sebastian eyeing him with concern.

‘Working too many hours, bit out of sorts,’ Ruscoe mumbled, in an attempt to explain his attitude. He fell silent and stared to his watch.

Stretching his arms as if in a relaxed state of mind, Sebastian was nonetheless becoming annoyed at what he viewed as self-pity.

‘Listen here, Russ, snap out of it. Forget your concrete and glass; relax and taste a bit of real living. There's more to life than a mainframe and a bunch of algorithms. Too many computer screens and cigarettes, that's been your trouble. Let go from that, for a week at least.’

All Ruscoe could do was nod though pleased with his friend's apparent concern.

Sebastian was eager for more brisk exercise. He possessed an athletic build and metabolism, and these demanded exertion. He felt he must shake Ruscoe from his depression.

‘I’m game for more action. Reckon you could keep up?’ he challenged with a grin.

Before a reply could be mustered, the forest had swallowed him.

Ruscoe took a deep breath and rode off in pursuit.

He came to a halt with his chest heaving and brought his watch to eye level. Even this minor invention was superior to anything nature could produce, Ruscoe thought, with its clever interaction of miniature elements, the only decaying piece being the quartz crystal. And this verged on the supernatural – he considered – with its uncanny ability to slice time into fragments. The sweep hand moved second by second and it somehow reassured him.

He was certain Sebastian would be waiting ahead, so he pedalled at a relaxed speed. Around a bend were large plates of earth and chalk, being the exposed undersides of trees, fallen from the autumn storm; and piles of logs with their striated bark peeling in curls. Scarred stumps populated the area like a collection of plinths. A spluttering noise began which Ruscoe believed came from a chainsaw. The track veered left to reveal, through the thin green trunks, a meadow ringed with poplars and bathed in sunlight. He threw down his bike with urgency and after kicking aside nettles and ferns, wove through the wood to the edge. A swathe of brambles divided him from the expanse of grass. What he had thought to be a chainsaw was the sonorous buzz of model aeroplanes weaving and diving about the turquoise sky as expertly as

swallows. The few clouds were mere dry brush strokes. A spaniel scampered amongst the heather. Ruscoe had an impulse to know the time again: it was six-thirty. The sun glinted in the glass. Then a flash of red and white from the other side caught his eye: Sebastian stood on a terrace over by the river. He was waving with one hand and raising a glass of beer with the other, as if giving a toast. The Waterside Inn – bright in the sunshine – bisected the terrace with a slab of shadow. Opposite, shielded by overgrown umbrellas, people in bright clothes sat luxuriating in the warmth of the afternoon.

The scene became too real: super-real, like a mirage or a waking dream. Ruscoe hurried back amongst the shady trees and set off on his bike in haste. He considered Sebastian must have followed the track rather than chance scratched legs from the brambles.

He was thirsty, his buttocks sore from the saddle, and all muscles depleted of energy. If only he had more tablets; a nagging sense of unfounded panic was taking hold. He wished for the protective armour of the city, away from this random world of browns and greens.

Surely these battalions of trees should have made way for the meadow? At least five minutes had passed, yet the forest was becoming denser, as if the trunks were shuffling together to form compact ranks. Even birds had been seemingly excluded and the absence of their song was unnerving. The lofty tops of the trees reached high enough to catch a breeze and their leaves hissed. Without warning, a wood-pigeon screeched and flapped untidily across Ruscoe's path. He was startled and almost lost control of his bike as it wobbled

dangerously. With a curse, he pedalled with more determination. He threw glances to the left and right, an uneasy sensation of being observed taking hold. He would surely be in the open soon.

Though how much further could it be?

Once more he looked to his timepiece and stared at it with indignation. The hands still showed six-thirty: his new watch had stopped.

On he went, becoming more tired and confused, for his logic was of no use here. He had endeavoured to make educated guesses when coming across forks in the footpath but there was no way of knowing if these decisions were correct.

If only he had brought a compass. The tracks were becoming less defined, less trodden; more branches curled across his way like dead snakes, and flints and jagged stones threatened to puncture his tyres. His skin itched and he felt dazed, sure signs that effects of his medicine were wearing off.

He began to despise the close-knit, dingy location with its quiet anonymity and potential dangers waiting and unseen. There was only confusion and disorientation to be found. This was far removed from the disciplines of science; a stringent, sterile world which he could grasp and comprehend. Worrying and peculiar conjecture came to him then. What if he were to be trapped within this illogical randomness? He would die for sure. But this shouldn't be the place, buried under the vegetable mass — he should be shrouded by concrete, metal and glass, comforted by his beloved computers and books. He did not belong; he was

misplaced. Rip open his skull and there might be a neural network of clicking binary switches and his guts full of silicon chips and tripe-coloured circuit boards.

Ruscoe stopped abruptly and shook his head to rid himself of the absurd notions. The situation was becoming ridiculous. He bellowed out the name of his friend but the only reply was from leaves in the breeze. If he listened intently to the susurrations, ritualistic syllables and reverential sibilants could be distinguished, as solemn and ancient as the planet itself. It was clear this vast overgrown area knew of his contempt of it, the hushed murmuring being passed along from copse to thicket, from spinney to covert; so that wherever he went, it would know of him and would be expecting him.

All sense of time fled. He had no idea as to how long he had been riding. After trying to solve this frustrating puzzle of escape without any tangible clues; after battling through hedges and banks of lavender; after pushing along winding lanes of sprawling trees, he finally discarded the bike and slumped down onto bracken, utterly fatigued. Straw was caught in his hair and insect bites swelled on his ankles. He drank the last of the liquid from the carton taken from the backpack, and it refreshed his parched mouth.

He must pull himself together. What would a trapper or woodman do in a situation like this? Of course — he would follow the sun. If he were to climb a tree, not only would he note the direction the sun travelled but might — if high enough — espy some landmark which he could aim for. Ruscoe left the bicycle where it lay and went into the woods to find a suitable specimen worthy of his task.

Perhaps it had not been such a commendable idea after all. He had clambered up onto a bough of a massive oak wreathed in woodbine, but then his stamina had failed him and he could go no further. And viewing upwards into the inner sanctum of the tree with his jaw dropped, he had concluded that even if he possessed the necessary strength, it would be impossible to see above the highest branches. He climbed down and lurched onward, becoming agitated and worried.

Hidden deep within the wildness sat the burnt-out, crumpled shell of a car. It was orange with rust, and ebony with soot and dirt. Devoid of tyres, it balanced on four pedestals of bricks. All windows had been smashed except the windscreen which was intact, though clouded into a crazy jigsaw of glass grains. Its bonnet gaped like some prehistoric beast, with most of the engine long gone from out the grim mouth. The roof was concave indicating that someone had jumped violently upon it. A spindly sapling had found its way up through the floor and out of the back window. The seats were piled to the side and in their place were plastic bags bulging with rubbish.

Ruscoe stared at the wreck. He could have believed that he had been the only one to have trodden over the mulch and moss here. Surely then, if a car had been driven this far, a road was near?

At first, he assumed that the lack of detail and depressing gloom descending was due to tiredness but realised with a jolt that it was getting darker. He hacked at the bushes and nettles with a stick and kicked aside trailing vines as he zigzagged through the thicket, desperate now to see light. The forest

was smothering him. He began to pant like a dog as a sickening claustrophobia took hold of his brow. Deeper shadows were forming all over — behind crops of bushes, around knobbled roots writhing from the base of trees and, as if with a purple dye, smearing the definitions of the trunks further away, making them indistinguishable from one another.

If only he had explained all to Sebastian (a man whose understanding and sincerity were unswerving) he might not be here now. But Ruscoe could not bring himself to tell of unbearable pressures accumulating within; of how he needed medication to keep from the cliff-edge of a nervous breakdown; or explain his neglect of wife Sarah who had moved to her mother's home, unable to cope with his dark moods; or how he had become impotent, not only sexually but socially. Being too concerned with the inner state made him ignore all outside of himself.

Ruscoe's mind had been churning and grinding — as unstoppable and powerful as huge cog-wheels — to produce a convoluted introspection. So wrapped up was he with his thoughts, he had barged through the forest without conscious decisions as to his direction.

Coming upon the abandoned car again, the realisation that he had gone in a large circle slapped his face. How could he be so foolish! What was worse, the mass of trees gave no indication as to the direction of where his bike lay.

Ruscoe fell to his knees in a melodramatic fashion and, wringing his hands, he wept uncontrollably. It was an ugly weeping with his face contorted and teeth bared. The tears were for being weary and angry and frustrated at the wasted

hours spent. With his city persona calm and logical hiding inside the shaking torso, he felt somehow detached from this alien emotion. The realisation that it was the first time he had cried since childhood washed through him and encouraged the tears. The jerking of his chest was almost painful, but after reaching the climax of his outpouring, he found it a strangely satisfying experience with some of his tension released.

The dusky foliage loomed menacingly above as if preparing to envelop him and the trunks were creeping, it seemed, imperceptibly closer. He took the backpack off and threw it aside, eyeing about him with suspicion. Although his stomach gurgled with hunger then and he was frightened, he let his smarting eyelids fall, and he slept.

That evening he dreamed of Sarah; and of clattering machines; and of death as substance, crouched in brooding places filled with stillness and expectancy; then of nothing. His distress and weakness dragged him down and he plummeted into a well of non-being.

As morning approached, Ruscoe bounced to semi-consciousness now and then, enough to pat the bracken as though plumping his pillow or to sleepily look about in disorientation, not quite sure why the bedroom walls had changed in texture. It had been a hot and sticky night although his rest had been more comfortable than most: those folk kicking their bedclothes from them, annoyed that their open windows did not have any effect on their stuffy and airless rooms.

His eyes sprang open. At first, Ruscoe was bewildered as to his whereabouts but then the events of the day before came

to mind in quick sequence. The once threatening boles encircling him were now mere picturesque, leafy trunks, accented with diluted ochre light, the spaces between filled with mist. Birds sang their patterns and the air was fresh, carrying with it aromatic odours.

He stood with difficulty, and stretched wide his arms and legs. They ached and were stiff. He felt surprisingly clear-headed although he shook with coldness from the morning air. Sitting on the wing of the car, he briskly rubbed his thighs and shoulders to muster warmth into them whilst considering his plan of action. If he were to move steadfastly forward in any one direction, he would inevitably come out. This forest could not go on forever. However, before anything else, he must eat and drink.

But where was the backpack? It could not have been thrown far. He searched amongst the dock leaves and grass until he came upon his sunglasses with the scratched lenses pointed blindly to the sky. From this marker, Ruscoe discovered a trail of the contents leading into the woods. His handkerchief draped over a thistle; a split carton lay with an inch of fluid remaining; pens and a ripped notepad, matches and paperbacks all had been scattered at random. And there at the end of this maddening paperchase was his plastic raincoat trailing – like a yellow intestine – from the backpack. Littered about it were scraps of his sandwiches and the silver foil clawed into shreds.

‘You swines!’ Ruscoe screamed. Some furry wild thing has done this, he concluded. More than likely a fox or badger. He collected up the belongings and dumped them into the savaged backpack with disgust. How he despised this evil

place with all his soul. Disheartened, he sat propped up by a wing of the car. He looked like a doll with arms flaccid beside him, his head lolling and eyes glazed and unseeing. Why not give up the fight and accept the inevitable? An image of his decomposing remains came to him, rotting in this precise position, and it prompted him to move. He must not be beaten — he would find the way out. Clutching the backpack with his bony fingers, he paced through the forest more determined than ever.

The place was alive. As if for the first time, he noticed movement amongst the ferns as a mammal made a hasty departure, a sudden flurry of leaves, or a quick bird darting by. Sunlight, finding gaps in the foliage, licked his face with warm shafts and the cool air invigorated him. Ruscoe checked his watch. Still it showed six-thirty but whatever the time might be, he would have rattled his tablets from the bottle and poured whisky by now. He was pleased with himself for although he felt the need of these, the desire was an easy one to control.

Without presage, a clearing stocked with sunflowers presented itself. Squabbling pheasants took off as Ruscoe neared. A stream flowed by with its fast waters chattering, leaping with spurts over lichen-covered rocks, and meandering in rivulets over and about the polished pebbles. Ruscoe hurried across to it. Laying on his belly, he dipped his cupped hands in. He scooped up and drank furtively at first. The water was cool and unadulterated and so he supped greedily. He was glad of it and set off, in the direction of which the water ran, with hope and replenished vigour.

For an hour he trekked through the forest, following the

stream; occasionally needing to skirt a gregarious collection of trees or wade into carpets of ground ivy, other times paddling through the water.

In the frenetic rush of city existence and dedication given to his work, Ruscoe had become isolated and regardless of other responsibilities. Yet here within the slow, breathing forest he was forced to confront himself, a timeless mirror reflecting back to him all that he was. Memories of himself and Sarah showed themselves and he was saddened, and hurt by them. These recollections highlighted his shortcomings and so, by shuffling through all the negative aspects of his personality, he had eventually reduced himself to a disgusting, despicable rogue. Was it possible he could be as villainous as the portrait he had constructed? He realised that being selfish and self-centred had alienated him from his wife, his friends and even his true self. Ruscoe resolved to make amends, once he was back home. It was never too late to change, to pay recompense, to mature and evolve...

The stream disappeared into the earth, below a contorted trunk astride a bank of crumbling chalk. Beyond was a mass of trees and bushes as impenetrable as a wall.

‘No!’ he shrieked. Without pause, he whipped around and stalked back against the flow of the stream, kicking it like a sulking child, splashing and sliding on the slippery stones. If this smug forest would not let him out one way, he would go the other. His patience was being pushed to the limit.

Despite possessing an all-encompassing weariness, Ruscoe was strangely exhilarated. Perhaps it was the absence of car fumes and the brisk exercise, with his lungs filled with clean air. Maybe this forest was not such a bad place after all. He

had grown invisible blinkers over the years, he knew. Of course, the geometry and mathematics of the natural world could be as absorbing, its biochemistry as complex, as any microprocessor. He noted the foliage, admitting it was intriguing as the infinite patterns of a Fractal. With an eyeglass set upon a leaf, the fine tracery of its skeleton would become clear; then through a microscope, the pod-like stomata would be viewed in fascinating arrangements. One could investigate elements of one cell, then its molecules, and further onward into a microcosm of atoms, containing the subatomic particles; and smaller still to minuscule pulses of power, existing for a trillionth of a mere blink of an eye.

And what of the Theory of Chaos, which states that many physical attributes of nature and the development of all living things could be shown to abide by the function of a single, simple equation? One could almost believe in an elemental force which was responsible for the beautifully uncomplicated concept. Theological notions clattered in his mind.

A fox, warily twitching its brush, turned to an auburn statuette and fixed its attention upon the stranger before vanishing. This was enough to break Ruscoe's reverie and he thrust his head forward so that he might catch sight of the creature. Instead, he saw the distinctive misshapen boot of the abandoned vehicle.

This car seemed to be the hub of his existence, for no matter which way he went, he was doomed to come across it again sooner or later. No less than a nightmare, never-ending roundabout of events; whereupon reaching the end of them, he would revert to the beginning to relive the dreadfulness.

Ruscoe decided to rest before embarking on the journey

upstream. After all, there was no point in rushing: it seemed the more he did so, the more the living forest played games with him. He hacked through the bushes with a stick to reach the car.

Although he was loath to admit, there might have to be another night spent away from habitation. Ruscoe began in earnest to empty the steel husk of its rubbish. He dumped the black bags in a pile away from this makeshift encampment. Once cleared, he discovered a sheet of olive tarpaulin spread over the floorpan, serviceable apart from oil stains and mildew. Woodlice and centipedes scuttled away as he dragged it out. Upon tying two ends to the window bars of the car, he supported the other side with some stout poles of wood pushed into the ground before clearing the area under the shelter. He hunted for dry branches and placed them methodically in a pile ready for a fire. He was easily exhausted and so lay down under the protection of the tarpaulin to rest for a while.

Ruscoe entertained himself by inspecting the discarded lumps of metal from out of the engine, imagining new uses for them or considering their original purpose. Then he collected some sticks and pebbles to devise an ingenious game of patience. Unexpectedly, he began to enjoy this relaxation. These pastimes did not require a deadline and his thought processes seemed clear in this arboreal setting. He was certain now he had been premature about his view of the countryside. After tiring of his game, he retrieved a penknife from the rucksack and set about stripping a branch of its bark. The smooth knurled shape appealed to him: resembling a writhing snake, he whittled at it to make it more so.

Ruscoe would close his eyes for a while before opening them to continue his handiwork. Eventually he succumbed and slipped into a delicious doze. The canopy trapped the moist, warm air heated by the glaring sun. He wriggled and turned under it, now and then gaining consciousness to scratch urgently or wipe his itching face before slipping back into a feverish sleep. He had been swallowing and taking from his mouth what he had thought to be – in delirious waking moments – crumbs of dirt. But a particularly sharp pricking sensation to his tongue caused him to open his inflamed eyelids. To his horror, he beheld a legion of ants teeming over him. They had found their way into his hair, clothes and nostrils, giving minute nips to his legs and swollen tongue. What had seemed a convenient grassy mound for laying his head was a red ants nest. Shuddering with horror and patting himself furiously, he turned over to see thousands more incarnadine specks streaming from it. He leapt to his feet with a yell, still smacking and shaking himself, revulsion enveloping him from the repulsive sensation of the crawling insects. In desperation, he barged through the bushes and trees, yanking away his clothes as he went. He threw his pale, wasted nakedness into the stream. The coldness of it took his breath away as he splashed and rolled in the cool water.

After dressing, then drinking to soothe his parched gullet, Ruscoe staggered along the stream, blaspheming and spluttering condemnation. He warned the forest of his desire for revenge: how he wished for the spirits instilled in wood and plant to shrivel so that without this fundamental force to bind together the ecosystem, it would wither and decay. Or that he would hire a bulldozer to clear the ground — or

better still, set fire to it.

But first he must get out...

He gave a dry, mirthless titter. The dead end that Ruscoe surveyed was of no surprise: he had almost expected it. A broad lake stretched before him with waterhoppers skittering on it and translucent-winged dragonflies hovering over the water. Emerald pads of water lilies floated in clusters, waxy-cream flowers decorating them. Rushes and grasses fringed the perimeter. Alder, flecked with white lichen, relaxed there. Feathery willow hung their branches into it, gazing with contemplation at their own reflections and that of the sun that sparkled on its surface. Ducks dipped their beaks, breaking the lake's smoothness, rippling circles radiating out from them.

At any other time, even Ruscoe might have appreciated this for its beauty. But all poetic notions were far away, too busy was he contemplating the vicious wilderness which should wish to incarcerate him. For not only was the forest impenetrable either side of the lake with its densely packed undergrowth but, at the far end, gushes of white water cascaded from ledge to ledge of a vertical, angular rock-face. High up in clefts were untidy nests. The sound of gulls squabbling there was lost to the roar of the waterfall. Ruscoe was dispirited and he stayed long by the water's edge, sullen and tired.

Aims and ambitions seem pointless when one is faced with survival. He must find food. With plans of escape and retribution swamping his senses, he had not realised the abundance available. Now, with this prerequisite in mind, Ruscoe discerned sources of sustenance wherever he looked.

A crab apple tree boldly displayed its fruit yet earlier he had walked passed it. He knocked down a number with a lean branch. Gingerly avoiding the spiny growths of blackberry bushes, he took their fruit; and even stole a speckled egg from a nest. He laid the pickings carefully into his backpack. The best find was a giant puffball – almost nine inches in diameter – which he had gently lifted from its root before cradling it proudly in his arms back to the abandoned car. He had read somewhere it could be consumed without worry.

His trophies were laid on the ground. He ate a few of the green apples and was surprised at how edible they were, though sharp to the palate, followed by a handful of blackberries crammed into his mouth. He would save the fungus and egg for later, he decided, once the fire was lit.

Already it was early evening. The sky was furnished with puffs of pink cloud and a feint moon. He must prepare for the night. Another day tomorrow: he was sure to escape then.

Ruscoe erected the tarpaulin on the other side of the metal carcass. Before being satisfied, he stamped upon the ground as if some archaic dance to ensure there were no more insect nests. Then he tore open the rubbish bags, one by one. The first bag was stuffed with newspaper but there was some twine he put aside. The second contained rotten refuse. After sorting through paint and food tins, crumpled clothes, bottles and broken crockery from the remainder, he had salvaged some useful items: a china mug, a metal bowl, a chipped plate and even an axe head and a fork. He washed them in the stream. Shielded by the canopy from the ever-weakening sunshine, he inspected them thoroughly. These would see him in good stead.

But what was he doing? Already he was acting as if he were staying. He was tricking himself — he must not be here anymore.

Again, the fighting through the verdant forest was useless. To keep a straight line was impossible and the few footpaths he came across took him to dead ends. And when coming upon the rusting hulk again, Ruscoe fell down with despair. The situation was preposterous: how could he be trapped in the English countryside, with villages, towns and people only a few miles away? The overgrown shrubbery was taunting him.

So, if another night must pass here, then at least he must do something useful. Ruscoe spent time pulling up weeds, and washing the inside of the car of its dirt and flaking rust before scrubbing it dry with rags. He cleared the site of stones and bracken, and broke up clods of earth to level it.

An idea came to mind: upon jamming a stick into the blunt axe head, he went to the stream to sharpen it on a wet stone. It took a long time but he was pleased with the results. He found a suitable branch — supple and tapering — which he chopped down and stripped of its offshoots. Attaching the twine to the thin end and an opened paperclip from his pocket to the twine, his rod and line was complete. He was going to catch a fish.

Ruscoe lingered by the lake until sunset — the golden rays tingeing the rippling surface — impatient for a fish to bite. He rubbed his stubbly chin: there were certainly some here for he had seen strings of bubbles rising, and catfish flapping between the rushes. He had tried blackberries for bait then a sandwich crust but they had merely nosed it or nibbled at it.

Not until he had tried a wild plum did he have success. There was a satisfying tugging on the line and, with a whoop of excitement, he snatched out a carp with its glistening scales turned gold by the sun.

The flames were greedy as the fire crackled and flickered brightly. Ruscoe was comforted in his halo of light: a protective yellow globe keeping the deeper shadows at bay. It lit up the trees and made a prancing shadow play.

He squeezed some juices from the fish into his saucepan and fried the leathery steaks of the puffball before ramming a stick through the belly of the carp to toast it.

Ruscoe ate with relish and curiosity: he had not eaten a fish so fresh before; certainly he had never partaken of this particular fungus. The carp was disappointing for it tasted muddy, although he found the puffball enjoyable with its delicate flavour of sweetbread and texture of marshmallow. The meal was finished with blackberries, and cups of hot water flavoured with fruit juice.

He retired under the canopy and sleepily gazed at the dying flames and embers, and the flitting moths attracted by its light; and listened to the rasping of grasshoppers.

For seven days more he attempted to find the edge of the forest. Glades of oak and wild cherry in valleys led him to hazel and rambling hawthorn, then onto hills spread with pine — but the forest would not let him out. His nights were spent sleeping amongst dock leaves or on banks of moss. One evening, espying a badger set, he was forced to sleep curled in the bosom of a tree. While walking the next morning, he had inadvertently stumbled upon his camp again.

On the fifteenth day, Ruscoe scratched fifteen lines on the

boot of the car. The inside of it was his larder — nuts and berries, barbel and tench wrapped in damp newspaper, and a variety of eggs. There was a collection of fungi: parasol mushrooms, ceps and shaggy inkcaps amongst others. He had learned that these rise from the earth overnight in dank and dark places and had become adept at finding the strange growths. He had tried eating acorns but found the raw kernels bitter. Roasting them as a side dish to trout was palatable. As a delicacy, he would fetch peppery watercress and tubers of the waterlily from the lake. He infused mulberry leaves and berries to make tea. The rod, left overnight with its line trailing into the water, would often have a catch the next morning, although Ruscoe would occasionally go fishing for relaxation.

He missed the taste of meat and so set about building a box trap. The rabbit caught under it was fortunate to be let free shortly after. Ruscoe had put his hands about its throat but quivering more than the animal in his grasp, he had begun to stroke its shivering fur as if it were a cat. If only the animal was already dead, skinned and wrapped in plastic.

Each day brought with it a new skill. He built a cabin with three sides set against the car body to include a door and window. It was fabricated from large branches set into the earth and bound with rope made from wiry rushes.

With the apparent uselessness of his treks — persuaded and cajoled always back to the encampment — Ruscoe's policy was to try every fourth day only. It was quite useless, he knew, but he must make the effort all the same.

Ruscoe swam in the lake and ran wherever he was able. He enjoyed the pure air and the freedom of his new lifestyle.

He was exhilarated by sunsets, and the sighting of a creature or plant not seen before. He noticed climate changes: a blistering heat one day, or overcast the next; a light shower or a brisk breeze. And he learned the distinguishing features of many trees, wild flowers, animals and insects living there. He began to draw and catalogue them in his notepads; and if he did not know the name of a particular component of the flora and fauna, he would devise one of his own.

The weather turned mild. Ruscoe had washed the old clothes found in the rubbish bags several times and they soon lost their musty smell. After stitching them together with twine using the shard of a flint as a needle, the makeshift covers were more than adequate to keep out the cold evenings. Ruscoe would often jog through the forest on his quest for the perimeter, enjoying the brisk air and the exercise. As winter approached, he had almost given up hope of ever escaping. While the snow laid its crisp white blanket over everything, he did not venture too far and busied himself making a stove, complete with a smoke flue, manufactured from engine parts from the old car. He ensured the cabin was watertight by applying strips of leather cut from the car seats and plastic from the bags to its roof. It had been a wise precaution, for the spring brought with it heavy downpours of rain and hail.

Ruscoe was thrilled to watch the dormant trees and plants come alive again: the pastel shades of blossom, and the varied berries and flowers. And the return of so many birds, including a thrush which he was certain he had fed the year before. The reborn summer arrived finally. It seemed as hot as the previous season, if not more so.

Ruscoe's beard had grown thick and his long hair had regained its brown colour. He felt strong — not only in body but also in mind. From despising the forest, he had grown to respect it for the beauty there; the interest of the involved food-chain with its cycle of living and dying. He would talk to trees in hushed tones, telling them of plans in his life, or to lay bare worries, invoking and communing with their transcendental spirits.

What secrets were still to be uncovered: what manner of extraordinary things were there to be found? Grateful to his habitat for providing him his simple needs, Ruscoe vowed to give back to the earth. One must give to be able to take, but when would the world realise, he thought, before it's too late? It was as clear as the day now: the rape of the forests, the polluting of seas with chemicals and plastic, the wilful slaughter of wildlife — all of these devastating actions will eventually destroy us, if continued. Steps have to be taken now to arrest the humiliating destruction before the irreversible decline begins. Holes in the ozone layer cannot be patched — he mused — rainforests cannot be restored to the barren dusty plateaus, animals cannot be reconstituted; all evolved over billions of years to be eradicated by man's craving for power and money. Industry and commerce must have a conscience and accountability. Science must not be in a vacuum, divorced from reality, Ruscoe considered; we are a complicated, organic and inorganic whole whereby, like in the mechanism of a watch, every part depends on each other part.

He stood naked at the edge of the lake. The sun — life force for all living things — filled his every cell with joy. Blood ran

vigorously in him. His sight had become acute and keen, and his once shabby, tired body transformed to being taught and upright, with bronzed muscles defined and strong. Preparing to dive, he paused. Ruscoe rejoiced in his nakedness. He breathed deeply the air and he glowed with dynamism and energy. Anguish and stress had been banished for ever as he rejoiced in a union with nature, an explosive vision of profound completeness; of joining with the very essence of creation. He swam as adroitly as a porpoise for half an hour. Then, hidden behind the waterfall on a slab of granite, he appreciated the sun's rays and mused on his sublime experience.

That evening, he kept the fire alight from the store of wood accumulated over many weeks, almost depleting it. Though he did not care: he wished to spend the night awake. He had made a genuine pact with nature which deserved his selfless attention and giving. He cherished every aspect of this true relationship; even the cloud of gnats hovering over stinging nettles; bluebottles crawling over the fish bones; the over-ripe fruit beginning to blister with decay.

The following afternoon, Ruscoe caught a pheasant in his box trap. He expertly broke its neck with a snap of the spine and immediately began to pull feathers from it, the wings still flapping furiously. Eventually the bird became still. He would save the feathers for another pillow. The deed was carried out without shame or remorse, for he knew man is a carnivore and therefore no different from a jaguar which stalks and kills its prey. Still we are different, Ruscoe considered whilst gutting and cleaning the insides of the meat; we hoard chickens bundled in cages, some blind with their eyes

scratched out; or calves never to see daylight so that their albino flesh can be a lust for the appetite; and we mercilessly maim and kill our own kind with a sort of madness...

Ruscoe ate the roasted pheasant with plums, nettles and dandelion leaves.

After letting the meal digest, he set about tidying and cleaning the cabin. He looked forward to his chores for it gave him pleasure to view his creations. There was the table and stool carved from a single piece of timber. Shelves lined a wall, with interesting ornaments of crystal and root upon them, beeswax candles and course booklets of paper. He had discovered – quite by chance – that newspaper, steeped in water and the sap of a particular plant, was bleached so as to leave only feint remains of the ink. Two car seats with their backs broken made as good a bed as any. Sprays of wild rose stood in pots and bouquets of fragrant flowers hung from the rifted walls. A picture hung there also, made from shells and pebbles embedded into clay.

The solution of how to find his way out of the forest had come in a dream. He was annoyed that he had not devised it in his waking hours. He had dreamt he was carving trunks into totems, and daubing them with weird glyphs and runes. Upon awakening, Ruscoe had immediately hurried to the rubbish pile to sort out the paint tins. Prising the lid from one he had found oily fluid laying on a paint crust. After stirring it thoroughly and preparing the others in the same manner, there was more than enough paint for his enterprise.

Each time Ruscoe ventured out over the following week, he would paint a number with a direction arrow on a tree at regular intervals. Upon his return he would apply this new

knowledge to a map. When trying a new route and coming across a sign on the bark, he was able to mark where the ways crossed and intersected. With the stream, lake and car drawn at the epicentre of all this, the map was almost complete.

One particularly warm morning, Ruscoe had finished scratching another line on the boot of the car when he decided to count them. With an eyebrow raised, he gave a chuckle. Today was the anniversary of his stay in the forest: today was the three hundred and sixty sixth day.

Later on, Ruscoe sat at the table to update the map. He was drawing thick curves of graphite on it to indicate the journey he had taken that morning, whereupon he stared in astonishment. This was the final piece of the puzzle. Tracing the lines and curves with a finger, Ruscoe checked and re-checked the validity of them, like a physicist who has discovered a unique set of equations, not daring to believe what he saw. It was extraordinary how he had avoided obvious routes and incredible that he had missed opportunities or repeated the same mistakes over and over. But there it was on the page as conspicuous as if written in large phosphorescent letters: the way out.

Ruscoe cleared the larder and threw the contents into the bushes, and put his diary and a few mementoes into his backpack. He poured earth on hot ashes still smouldering from the night before and, without looking back, set off.

Adrenaline coursed through him: he was excited and expectant. He rushed (as one is encouraged to by a city) as if late for work. Indeed, several times he caught himself looking to his watch strapped again to his wrist.

Astounded, Ruscoe discovered his bike where he had left

it twelve months before. Following the advice from his map, he chose to ignore the way he had come those months ago and cut across instead, a difficult task being encumbered with a bicycle. Not very far through the forest, he discovered the piles of cut trunks and uprooted trees. He leapt on his bike and so strong was he now, he picked up an extraordinary speed along the forest path.

And there was the meadow. Ruscoe sprinted between the trees, and tripped into the open as if the forest had said: “Go then if you must! Leave me quickly!” The strong sunlight lit his hirsute face. He stroked the beard and shook his head in consternation. The model aeroplanes still played high in the air, slicing it with their growls; the brown dog still ran through the gorse, and a magpie chased its mate out from under a thorny bush.

Ruscoe inspected the watch. The second hand – showing six-thirty – twitched into movement again. The watch glass glinted. Across the other side of the meadow, Sebastian stood beckoning by the Waterside Inn and raising a glass of ale to the sun.

Ruscoe unstrapped the watch with dedicated ceremony and flung it into the brambles.

His mission was certainly clear; he was not ready to leave. There was more to learn, more significance and understanding to be bestowed upon him.

He turned back. Walking slowly into the arms of the forest, Ruscoe Robinson smiled.

There was firewood to be fetched.

I hope you enjoyed reading this excerpt from *Two Dogs At The One Dog Inn And Other Stories*.

Available as a Kindle ebook and paperback from Amazon.

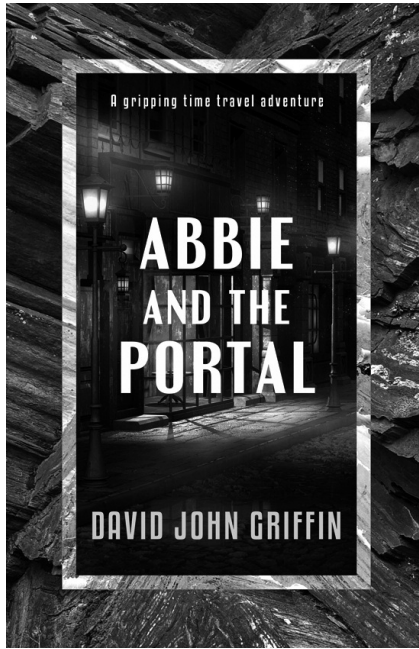


David John Griffin is a writer, graphic designer and app designer, and lives in a small town by the Thames in Kent, UK with his wife Susan, and two dogs called Bullseye and Jimbo. He is currently working on the final draft of his fifth novel.

His first novel, *The Unusual Possession of Alastair Stubb*, was published by Urbane Publishing in November 2015. Urbane also published David's literary/psychological novel entitled *Infinite Rooms*. His book called *Abbie and the Portal* (a science fiction time travel adventure) was published in 2018. The urban fantasy novel *Turquoise Traveller* was published in 2019. One of his short stories was shortlisted for The HG Wells Short Story competition in 2012 and published in an anthology. He has several other stories published in various collections.

You can find out more about David at
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Also available on Amazon:



ABBIE AND THE PORTAL

"Help me, I'm trapped" is the plea from a young woman named Abbie Concordia, written as a mysterious note found inside a Victorian book called Caving in Faringham. Terry Bridge, a reporter for The Charington Echo, takes up the challenge to save her...from the past. A gripping sci-fi time travel adventure story that will captivate you from beginning to end.

"Great premise, scintillating pace, and a most intriguing plot"

"Utterly absorbing"

"A story that had me engrossed from the start"

