

Ledge

by J.W. Wood

to Mike and Nic

“But did you really... know him?”

The young man looked up at Howard Gilmour, his tone one of anxious enquiry.

“Sure. We were friends at Cambridge: you could say I taught Rod his first chords. Busked round Spain with him, the works.”

Howard’s attendance at the annual Rod Nicholas Convention was its highlight – at least, as far as Howard was concerned. Each year, Rod Nicholas fans gathered at the spot where he’d disappeared: a concrete ledge over the Grand Union Canal in Dalston, East London.

They listened to Rod Nicholas music, debated details of his biography and moped about the vacuous 2020s versus the sixties, a period that ended four decades before most of them were born. Rod Nicholas himself, creator of two critically-acclaimed albums which both stiffed on release, was last seen here on July 24, 1973.

The boy speaking to Howard was early twenties. He’d obviously bought the Rodney Nicholas myth wholesale. While this boy was heavier than Rod would have allowed himself to become – he was a vain old sod, our Rod – Howard noted the lank, dark hair and long fingernails on the kid’s right hand; the velvet jacket, drainpipe jeans and excess of patchouli oil. So this boy fancied himself as a guitarist. The next Rod Nicholas, even.

Howard wondered if this boy also shagged other people’s girlfriends, as Rod had. Not likely given that paunch, but you never know. A girl wearing clothes of a style Howard had not seen in fifty years piped up:

“Can you tell us your favourite Rod Nicholas memory please, Mr. Gilmour?”

Howard recalled lying on a mattress, listening to the moans and gasps as Rod had it off with his sister’s friend in their squat; Rod smoking so much weed his nostrils turned brown; Rod pissed up and driving like a lunatic through Worcestershire’s byways.

“He was such a spiritual person”, Howard intoned. “I have many fond remembrances. In particular” – he always told them the same thing to embellish the Rod Nicholas myth – “I recall one time, when I’d bought a new guitar. This one, as a matter of fact.”

And with a flourish, Howard opened the guitar case he’d brought along. He did this every year: a bog-standard K-brand acoustic guitar he’d swapped for a piece of hash in 1968. A sigh went round the audience. The girl’s eyes sparkled.

“Did Rod Nicholas play that guitar?”

“Yes he did”, Howard affirmed, leaving out the fact that Rod said it was the worst fucking guitar he’d ever seen, and that a shoebox strung with piano wire would have been better. “But what matters most is what he said about it. He said it would be stuck with me forever – rather like my memories of dear Rod, I suppose.”

Howard’s audience contemplated his words. Someone a couple of rows back put up their hand:

“Two questions if I may... can I call you Howard?”

Howard raised both arms in a gesture of expansive generosity. Of course. He smoothed down the creases on his waxed jacket – chosen to show he was still an outdoorsy guy, if perhaps no longer a hippie – and ran a hand through the fringe of his carefully-curated silver hair.

“Firstly, what’s your favourite Rod Nicholas number? And secondly, where do you think he went after he disappeared? Do you think he might be... still with us?”

Howard took out his tobacco pouch (he always did this, even if he hardly smoked these days) and rolled a cigarette.

“My favourite number? Either *Hear Freedom Chime*, I suppose. Or maybe *Four Minutes Until Morning*.”

“Doesn’t that one mention you?”

Howard grinned his bashful assent. He usually timed this move so he could lick the seam of his roll-up and light it while smiling sagely – and this year was no different.

“So they say”, he whispered through a cloud of smoke. Then louder: “What are the words again?” – even though he knew them by heart. His audience sang in unison:

“Four minutes to morning

Howard will come

Waiting to breathe

His prayer to the sun.

Four minutes till morning

Howard will fly

Then we can offer

Our souls to the skies.”

Howard waited until they had finished, then: “I’m so pleased you’re keeping his music alive. What a talent – a gossamer wing in a steel-hearted world.”

Howard's mind flitted to the sunny afternoon in early 70s England when Rod first played him that tune. He remembered watching long, bony fingers stained with nicotine flying across the frets of a Martin D28 guitar. Rod had tuned the guitar to some impossible key like F sharp minor 9, or something, and formed the most basic chords using five-fret stretches and other show-offy arcana from the expert guitarist's repertoire.

When Howard asked Rod why he had to go to such lengths just to play regular sounds like E major or A minor, Rod chuckled.

"Keeps 'em guessing", Rod grinned. "Got to build an air of mystery, Howard!"

Howard snapped out of his reverie, his focus warping forward five decades. He cleared his throat and checked his audience over. They would now be approaching peak emotional fervour.

He took a deep draw on his rollie. No doubt they were already crafting poems and songs in their heads that incorporated Howard's wilfully over-wrought description of his shagged-out, smoked-up chum into their own fevered imaginings.

"... and... and, Howard? What do you think happened to him?"

This was one of the top five FAQs (Howard learned that term from his post-hippie corporate career) he was always asked. His gave a response calibrated to meet the specific pitch of this year's celebrants:

"Dear Rod was a gypsy soul. I like to think he wandered off from here and ended up someplace else. You know, Goa or Koh Samui or someplace. Somewhere... more spiritual."

At this point, there were usually some further questions before somebody suggested repairing to the pub on Balls Pond Road that hosted this annual jamboree's evening session. The pub would play Rod's two records on rotation all evening, interspersed with studio out-takes, home recordings made on a two-track when Rod was fifteen, and edited snippets from the three interviews recorded before Rod's disappearance.

The faithful would step outside to smoke joints, discuss Rod's guitar tunings – ah, Rod's tunings! – his spiritual significance and his taste in hand-rolling tobacco before eventually falling into taxis or each other or both some hours later. The pub always had good wet sales during Howard's appearance at the convention, and usually made sure he got a share of the take.

But this year, things would be different. As Howard finished smoking his cigarette, he caught sight of an old man poddling along the canal towpath. Although the old man was still more than a hundred feet away, he held Howard's attention for some reason.

"Mr. Gilmour, thank you so much for your time", the organiser, a young drip named Barry or something, intoned. "Would you like to join us in the pub?"

Howard gave his assent, though he never took his eyes off the old man approaching them. The crowd moved off, Howard casting frequent glances at the figure who was now, beyond any doubt, following them. Howard took a final pull on his rollie and crushed it under a Cuban boot-heel.

The man was tall and lean, with close-cropped grey hair. His facial features resembled a relief map of the Ural mountains paired with an unmade bed. Who was he? He looked about Howard's age.

The group soon arrived at The Fiddler's Arms on Balls Pond Road. As always, Howard was asked if he wanted a drink and as always, he asked for a half of bitter. But this time, Howard didn't follow the group into the pub, excusing himself by saying he wanted to have another quick smoke first.

The young people slid into the pub on waves of naïve optimism and occult perfume. Howard sat down outside with his tobacco pouch, watching the old man shuffling towards him. Now he knew what emotion he felt – and it was fear. For some reason he couldn't define, this guy scared him – despite looking as harmless as an ancient insect preserved in amber.

"Hello Howard", the old man croaked as he drew nearer.

"Hello," Howard replied with hesitation. He could smell the old guy now: piss and filth. A tramp of some kind. Howard relaxed a little. But how did this guy know his name?

The old boy wore a Russian officer's greatcoat, despite it being a warm evening in late July, and a pair of ancient corduroy trousers that may, in a previous life, have been bottle-green. Straight-up early seventies gear. All that was missing was a Celtic spirit-symbol on a leather chain around his neck and a collarless shirt.

As the man sat down at Howard's table without being asked, a Celtic cross appeared dangling from a string inside the old guy's striped collarless shirt. Bingo – the full package.

"It's good to see you again after so long", the man intoned.

Those words did it. That drawl which merged privilege with panic, a Cambridge education with the anonymous life of the indigent.

"Rod?"

Then that sly smile, broad as an English summer sky.

"Got a smoke, mate? It's been a while."

Howard pushed the tobacco pouch across the rough wooden table to the man who would be Rod Nicholas and finished rolling his own. Soon he'd pulled out a packet of Bluebell matches and sparked them both up, and it could be 1973 all over again – apart from the dirt and stench emanating from his erstwhile friend.

Howard took another long draw on his rollie, then:

"What happened, Rod? Where did you go?"

Rod paused and took rapid, hungry drags, eyes closed as smoke fumed from his nose and mouth.

"I don't know. I just got a bit sick of playing and getting nowhere, I suppose. So I decided to disappear. Then I realised the less I did, the more popular I became – so I kept my head down. Mum and Dad collected my royalties, and I made sure they always knew where to find me. By agreement, they never told anyone my whereabouts. When they passed away I got my share of their estate, so I – well. I never really needed to do anything, really. So I didn't!"

Rod tapped the ash off his cigarette and turned his head half-on to Howard, holding the burning fag pinched between two fingers exactly the way Howard remembered he'd done half a century ago. Rod took another draw, then:

"So what brings you here? And who were those young people?"

"I'm here to talk to a convention of your fans, Rod. I do it every year."

"Oooh! My fans! I say. Well, now they can meet the real thing. Do you want me to go in and talk to them? I could tell them a thing or two, hey?"

"I don't think that would be a very good idea, Rod."

"Why not?"

"Let's just say they have a certain idea of who you are. Or were."

"Really? What?"

"Remember that night you pulled your sister's mate and the pair of you went at it like rabbits on speed next door to me in that squat? I don't think they'd want to hear about that. Nor would they want to hear how you were about to jack in the music and become a computer programmer. Or was it join the army? Anyway, there's a lot they don't need to know."

"Oh, but I'm sure I could" –

"No, you couldn't, Rod. Here's what I suggest: just piss off. Get out of here before one of them comes out and sees you."

Rod opened his mouth to protest but was stopped by Howard's next angry howitzer:

"Go on! Get out of it! Disappear! You'll thank me later. Here, take my number" – Howard scribbled his phone number down on the back of the pack of matches, the first time he'd done that in forty years. "Now fuck off. I mean it. Get out of here or I'll sort you out."

Rod got up from the table with glistening eyes, roll-up still perched between those slender guitarist's fingers.

"But Howard! Man! Why have you gone all bad vibe on me?"

Howard stood up, fists quaking in Rod's direction. Rod took the hint and shuffled away whence he came, down to the ledge at the Grand Union Canal. The door to the pub opened and the plump young man who fancied himself as the new Rod Nicholas appeared with Howard's half of mild.

"Mr Gilmour! Have you finished your cigarette? Here's your drink. We were just discussing the influence of Rod's trip to Tunisia in '68 on his playing, and hoped you might have some insights."

Howard took a final draw on his roll-up and pinched it out, feeling the angry blood drain from his face and neck. He reached out with a smile and took the glass of beer from the youngster.

"Thanks so much. I'd be delighted to join you. I do miss Rod so very much, you know."