

# ROMANY



A short story about England embedded in and essential to a novel about England, “Memories of Wickhamstead Park”, by Nick Ashton-Jones

Dreamed up in Okomu Forest, Nigeria about 1991 and revised on Weppa Farm twenty-five years later

Dedicated therefore to Phil Hall who got me out there in the first place

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## 1 SOLITARY BOY

Roman Wood had been the first if not the only love of Sol's life. Not much of a wood either, more a bit of scrub: a bit of poor farm-land, allowed to go wild and to escape the rigid necessity of the agricultural landscape around it. Tolerated by the steward of the last Lord St Romans because it provided cover for game. Then forgotten in the dismemberment of the estate resisting encroaching suburbia, surviving as a refuge for foxes, badgers, hedgehogs and the larger birds unable to adapt to the neat, new gardens. The wood had survived also as a refuge for Gypsies. Real Gypsies, Roma, perhaps the descendants of the last Romans, those who'd stayed behind, destined to wander forever in the damp and misty British islands. Just as likely, the Ancient Britons, the dark Iberian, Atlantic stock, with the addition of outlaws, highwaymen, the agricultural dispossessed and the happy folk who refused to be sucked into the industrial towns, and who live still in romantic memory, in squats, on the edgelands.

For Sol, as a child, and for the others, Sally and Cliff, Roman Wood had been more than the scrubby remnant of old England: it'd been the Hall of the Mountain King (their mother would bash out the Grieg melody on the piano, with dubious skill but with great energy, while they marched to its rhythm around the dining-room table), Logris, Sherwood, Coral Island, and sometimes the Nigerian forests where their father lived. Sally, being older, soon outgrew the games but when their father did come home for good, tamed and unhappy, acting the die-hard colonialist and

empire-builder he was not, he too entered into the romance of the place, remembering his own youth, showing the boys how to survive in the 'bush', building shelters from branches and leaves, cooking food on little fires, sausages on sticks, eggs in old tins, and whole potatoes roasted in the embers. Usually, as Sol recalled, the adventures took place on damp grey Saturday afternoons, when his father would play the game with a forced, almost manic, joviality, working hard to dispel the depression which, like the weather, would otherwise overwhelm him.

Roman Wood had been a permanent part of Sol's childhood landscape. It'd formed one of the reference points of his youth, linked to the house by another, the old hedgerow running down the middle of Wickhamstead Lane.

In those days Wickhamstead Lane had looked like a lane still, quickly metalled to serve the new houses, including their own, being built on the edge of Wickhamstead Park, for which it'd served as boundary between Park-land and farm-land. And because the lane was ancient, sunken and narrow, a new road, cheaply made up and not much wider, had been laid on the other side of the hedge to serve the speculative housing being built on what had been Wickhamstead Park Farm, between Roman Wood and the railway line. As a result, Wickhamstead Lane existed for a while as a sort of primitive dual carriageway, with the hedge growing wilder and more unkempt, but more beautiful also. Within its narrow confines, hawthorn, blackthorn and hazel, holly, oak, and elm struggled to become trees after centuries of hedgedom. Eventually the old hedge had formed a solid, living, cordon sanitaire between what the Post Office called Wickhamstead Lane South, the posh side, and Wickhamstead Lane North, not nearly as smart. Only the innocent children, who had their hidey-holes in the hedge bottom and tunnels where they met, were ignorant of the hedge's ignominious duty as social divide.

Sally and Cliff grew out of Roman Wood but Sol kept faith with the only place in which he felt comfortable. Outside Roman Wood, and with an intensity that became stronger as he grew up, Sol felt uneasy with his family, and with the intimacy of family life. He imagined his family, in turn, feeling uneasy with him; he could not banish the thought that they'd

rejected him, despite the fact that it was the younger Cliff who'd been sent away to school at the beginning of the war. Sol had been kept at home as his mother's "special, solitary boy", an epithet that only made Sol feel more odd and out of step. And, in any event, in spite of his stated specialness, his mother gave most of her attention to Sally, the daughter, who was growing into a prim young woman, distant from the brothers, with whom, apparently, she no longer wanted to associate. Sally was for and with her mother – girls together – religiously following her mother's ladylike mannerisms and style of dress, as if determined to attain middle-aged womanhood as fast as she could.

Sol felt no closer to the men of the family. Cliff was away at school, and in the holidays, because Cliff was tougher and more mature than his older brother, they'd little in common. What time they did spend together usually ended in a fight and Sol's humiliation. They shared a bedroom because their parents slept in separate rooms.

His father appeared on the scene as an old man who resented his home-coming. He spent whole days in his room writing with a manic, compulsive energy, angry if he was disturbed and only emerging to spend equally manic hours working in the garden, no less intolerant of interference there. However, he would make unexpected, short-lived and rather impatient efforts to take an interest in Sol: talking to him about the garden, and encouraging his coin collection and his interest in architecture, with one memorable expedition to the cathedral in St Romans. There were also the expeditions to Roman Wood.

## **2 SOLITORY MAN**

The adolescent Sol had not felt sorry for himself, for he had all the essential if, in retrospect, irrational, arrogant, optimism of youth. But he felt alone, separated from his family, and therefore he liked to be on his own, in order to feel he controlled his life. In Roman Wood, he found the solitude he wanted, where he could inhabit his own world, where he could believe he was someone else in another time and where he felt free to think his own thoughts. Rarely did a day pass when he did not walk down

the hill, beside the hedge, to Roman Wood. His solitary, apparently aimless, wanderings became a family joke initiated by his father and happily taken up by the others; not because they wanted to tease but because, fondly, they wanted to understand him and to place him in the context of the family. His father had picked up his mother's comment and called him "The Solitary One" of the children. He'd not wanted to hurt but rather to understand the eldest boy because for all the private pains, he did feel that they were a family under one roof. They were consoled by the presence of one another and by the protection of that roof, and they wanted Sol to join them under it.

The Solitary One was a mouthful, and it was Sally, unexpectedly out of the character Sol had designed for her, who shortened it to Sol. She put it, first of all and recorded, on the fly leaf of a book about local history she gave him for his fourteenth birthday: "To Sol, The Solitary Man, with love from Sally."

Seeing the words, written in her small neat hand, he felt a warm love for her, wondering if she had some secret longing that she also did not understand. He blushed, stammering his thanks, barely able to lift up his head to look at her. And seeing his delight, his father and mother took up the name and it stuck, replacing, and clearly more appropriate to his character than, the prosaic John or ridiculously inappropriate Johnny that'd heretofore been his tag.

But despite his Sol, despite the symbol of intimacy with his family, Sol remained true to his name, solitary and in need of Roman Wood. Each morning as soon as he got out of bed he would open the curtains of his bedroom window overlooking the front garden – all the others overlooked the back – and he'd see the hedge connecting him with Roman Wood.

Beyond the hedge, and surrounding Roman Wood, he saw open fields, meadows, woods and low, smoky, thatched huts, a reality that erased the temporary imposition of unworthy housing estates devoid of humanity. In the school holidays, he'd often get up early to walk down to Roman Wood, and in term-time he'd do no less than cycle past the place on his way to school: a convoluted route taking him down Wickhamstead Lane to double back up Wickhamstead Park Drive to get onto the

Hamstead Road, that took him to school. He could not cycle up the lane again because his father, often out gardening early in the front, might see him, and want ask questions.

### **3 SATURDAY MORNING**

Saturday morning, May with the dawn chill hard in the air. A needle of thin light pierces his sleep. He is wide awake and out of bed with an urgent need to be walking, moving his limbs down the hill, beside the hedge. The woodland, a memory of cover, fresh for now, for one more spring, with new leaves and a hint of Summer; the tangle of brambles and patches of young nettles beautiful to look at: sweet scents, yet to become pungent bitterness. Primroses, in the light: delicate thoughts yet to be lost in the dark prejudice where once-bright flowers fester and rot.

The boy tiptoes out of the house, holding the door firmly as he shuts it. Sally, awake too and knowing, hears him before drifting back into guilty sleep. He inhales the cold, awakening air, dense with the dawn chorus. Hurrying, with an urgency new to him, he walks fast towards the idea. A worn path crosses a dry ditch, silted, filled with neglect; the earth dew velvet, overhanging shrubs shower as he brushes through, entering the woodland.

### **4 THE BROWN MAN**

Inside, the smell of wood smoke drew him to the heathy opening at the centre: a place missed by the few walkers who passed through. Before Wickhamstead Park had been broken up, it'd been a favourite camp-site for peddlers – forgotten Roman legionnaires – beside whose road it lay between the West Middlesex horse fairs and their Breckland homes. The gamekeepers, sympathetic, condoned and even encouraged the practice, which had continued well into the 1920s, until the new suburban inhabitants of the district called on the authorities to move on the Gypsies.

Sol knew the place, moved by its emptiness and sense of happier times past. Always it'd been empty and often he would lie on the springy

turf staring up at clouds shifting; in half sleep, he'd hear the lively conversations of the peddlers and the crackling of the fires around which they sat. He felt the story of the earth beneath him insisting against his weight upon it.

There lay the brown man, as expected, rolled up, asleep inside himself beside the dying fire.

The boy knelt beside the man, looked down onto the round, compact, sleeping head, helmeted by thick, black hair, drifting across the brow. The boy watched the breath of life move between dark lips, slightly parted to expose contrasting small white teeth. A blush of black stubble covered the cheeks and chin, a day or two thicker about the mouth.

If there is love at first sight, Sol was primed and ready to fall, hungry for an affection he, who might have learned, would never learn. As he looked at the sleeping face, sensing the manly warmth of the worsted bundle, he saw the most beautiful, and loveable thing he'd ever wanted. He wanted to shift the hair from the forehead with his hand; he wanted to touch the eyelids, oily from sleep and watch the dreaming eyes flicker below. He wanted to touch, with his lips, the lovable eyes, ever so lightly, ever so gently, ever so lovingly. He wanted to feel the other's breath on his cheek and inhale the heavy scent of sleep; to awake his sleeping prince. The wild Romany, Ancient Briton, manifestly not settled Saxon like himself. Later, an older man would know the meaning of dying for love.

Wild it was, for as he watched, dreaming, it jumped, leapt up at him with such sudden ferocity that he answered the man's call with his own instinctive, shuddering, fear:

"Ah!"

"Ahhhhh."

Sol tripped backwards and the man fell on top of him, pinning his wrists to the ground above his head, kneeling over him and squeezing his chest between iron knees.

"You, what yer doing?" the man blasted at Sol, bringing his face so close that Sol smelt the bitter earthiness of black passion; felt hot breath spitting at him.

The man's black eyes blazed, not with anger but with a fearful

recognition and challenge; as if he'd seen a ghost; frightened he was, a startled animal.

"I, I, I," stammered Sol unable to get out a word, his heart exploding.

"You, you, you. You what?" mimicked the man. "What yer want? A doing that to me? Prowlin' about."

Then, seeing Sol's speechless fear, he laughed and Sol saw the glitter of gold. A laugh like the sun bursting through storm clouds but before he could laugh with it the face came down fast and kissed him hard, quickly and fully on the lips. Then as fast it sprang back.

The sense of relief and reality was palpable and while the man remained kneeling astride Sol, he released his grip on the boy's wrists, taking hold of the shoulders instead.

"I, I'm sorry," said Sol, "I didn't mean to startle you." He wanted to add: 'Sir'. To the man who would be his master.

He watched the other's grinning face, loving its lean and weathered beauty, the broad and high cheekbones shining brown in the morning sun. But as he watched the grin froze; sadness filled the black eyes, which shifted and despite being aimed at Sol, passed through him, penetrating the earth below. They died before him as the mind of the man drifted elsewhere, remembering another boy.

Sol was filled with unbearable pity. He caressed the calves of the legs that held him, feeling the taught muscles pressing tighter. Never had he felt so close to another human being – never would he feel so again.

"I'm sorry."

There was no verbal reply but as he held on, so he felt again the squeeze of an answer. He waited until the roaring pain had subsided and the tears had dried.

"I'm sorry," he ventured quietly, "I didn't mean to upset you. Did I frighten you?"

"No, boy," the man replied, looking at him straight now. He spoke a rounded, earthy song that caught at the back of his throat; an ancient accent from the time before London had swamped the country; before the railway had even been imagined.



“No, boy, you didn’t a feared me. You ’minded me. I was a dreaming ’im and when I saw yer methinks fer a minute you was ’im. Then I saw you wasn’t and I knew ‘e couldn’t be. Then I was angry.” He looked kindly at Sol and would have got up had Sol not held on to him for all he was worth. The two misfits relaxed.

When their eyes met again Sol asked tentatively: “Who’s him?” Afraid to stir painful memories yet eager to know.

But the man only smiled because the thoughts and the dreams were not new to him; he lived them: “Oh, ’e was my master when I was your age; younger, I reckon. I loved ’im. We used to rabbit together round ’ere afore they built ’em posh ’ouses.” He spat out the description disdainfully. “An’ I was all ’e ’ad; ’is father being so distant like.” He paused, thinking back to those happy days. “’E wen’ off, to the war and never comes back like ’e promised. Got ’imself killed. Killed in action, they said. And fer what?” He turned bitter: “fer ’is king and ’is country.”

He sneered and looked ugly: “’is king, fuck ’im and his cunt-tree. Fuck ’em both.”

He looked at Sol as if it was his fault. Angry at the waste of that life, and of his life and at the chance of another wasted life to come.

His expression softened and once again the sun burst through as a thrush sang. “You look like ’im. A bit. ’E was bigger, stronger. But then,” he regretted, “you couldn’t be could yer?”

Sol was thrilled by the man’s language and unpatriotic sentiments. But shocked as well, for in those days he was proud of the British Empire; proud his father had been part of it in Nigeria.

The man shook himself free, jumped up, released, danced backwards to look down at Sol. An agile black cat: feral. Again, the man’s eyes blazed and magnificent he looked as he stood above, legs apart and hands on hips.

“Anyways, what yer doing ’ere? It’s not safe; some odd folks come ’ere at night. An’ not just lovers,” he smirked, “but oddities.”

Then he shouted laughing: “Like me!” He looked down at Sol, grinning; a wild cat again, willing to pounce, given half a chance. Powerful and in control despite the grin, so that now he demanded: “I said what yer

doing?"

"Walking."

"Well walk back 'ome to your mummy afore I beat yer."

He gently kicked Sol's side: "Go on."

Insistent he was, making a joke of urgent necessity. Begging Sol to be off: "Go, I say." A cry, almost to himself. He might lose control.

Roughly he pulled Sol up, hugged him and sent him off with a slap on the backside.

"See yer, boy."

"See you."

He watched the reluctant, fatally wounded boy walk away, and might have cried out, ready to give chase, if required. Better to frighten the lad than spoil him. After a safe distance had been achieved he followed the path to his own cell, remnant of the old place, smashed greenhouses, weed-infested dreams and the old-man, curse 'im, who'd come, manifestly, out of the war, to cause more destruction. A wiz-bang that'd failed to live up to expectations. Instead, a compromise of fake houses, the old park and wide fields broken by garden fences and paths of broken flagstones. The broken hall, never much in itself, another fake, but his boyhood home, the bits of truncated gardens he kept as an act of something like religious adoration for the broken memory of another boy gone to war. Himself crippled. The boy also. And groaning, a little, he fell apart some more, to be held together with bits of garden twine and memories sweetened by time to an old age where they might meet again.

"See you." Sol looked back wanting to stop and say more but the man'd disappeared into the trees.

He returned to the bosom of his family. Well-fed and comfortable, he became a townplanner. A career of choice. Next time he came across the brown man, he'd insist. Save me! But the possibility evaded him as, in the end, he knew it would.

## **5 LEAVING A WOUND**

The hedge and Roman Wood survived into the 1960s, by which time Sol

was working – as a townplanner (for God’s sake!) – and his father was dead. A row of shops called Wickhamstead Parade was built where the woodland had been. Also a service station and a pub, The Romany. The hedge was cleared to make Wickhamstead Lane into a proper, modern, sensible road to serve the newest generation of housing estates being built beyond the Parade. Sol was profoundly disturbed by the rapidity with which his romantic view was blasted out of existence by the internal combustion engine. The confounded machine that drove the narrowest definition of families – by the thousands – to live their isolated, introverted, sub-urban, sub-rural, lives, as his own family’s comparative wealth had enabled it to do a generation or two earlier. He was forced to accept that his private delusion was a neurotic desire to avoid something he did not want to define, and making matters worse, he understood the part he played in propagating the greater social delusion that had destroyed Roman Wood, the old hedge of Wickhamstead Lane and his own instinctive life. As a townplanner – a term he began, too late, to despise – he had idealistically, ignorantly, helped – from within the delusion he suffered – to contrive the stupid idea of sanitised peasant cottages for all, with electricity, plumbing and room for a motor car to carry you to work and to the shops, and into which pigs, chickens, naked children and neighbours could not intrude, now that the radio and, recently, the television had taken on the task of enlightenment. He suffered a sort of breakdown. One day there’d been a hedge, and the next it was gone, leaving a wound of soil, flints and bits of chalk: the ancient lane, made by the feet of the old Britons and the Roma, and then worn down by farmers taking their produce to the market at St Romans, had been bulldozed out of the view inside a couple of days. He couldn’t bear to look at the reality. He lay in bed with the curtains shut, tortured by the noise of the road-making machinery until, fleeing Wickhamstead Park, he caused his mother and sister a desire to feel concern relieved a little by a postcard announcing temporary residence in a Bayswater hotel for some necessary days. In order to think things over. A feared liaison was disproved by his unaccompanied return to domestic sanitation a day later. Nothing was said when he moved into his father’s vacant room at the back of the house.

From here he would also look out to the beech trees at the bottom of the garden: a fragment of woodland he could make believe led to an idea better than the back of a house on Wickhamstead Park Drive. As head gardener, you might say, he carried on from where his father left off, the front hedge allowed to grow wild with inserted dog roses and honeysuckle. Sanctuary within which a child might hide or a man might seek shelter.

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