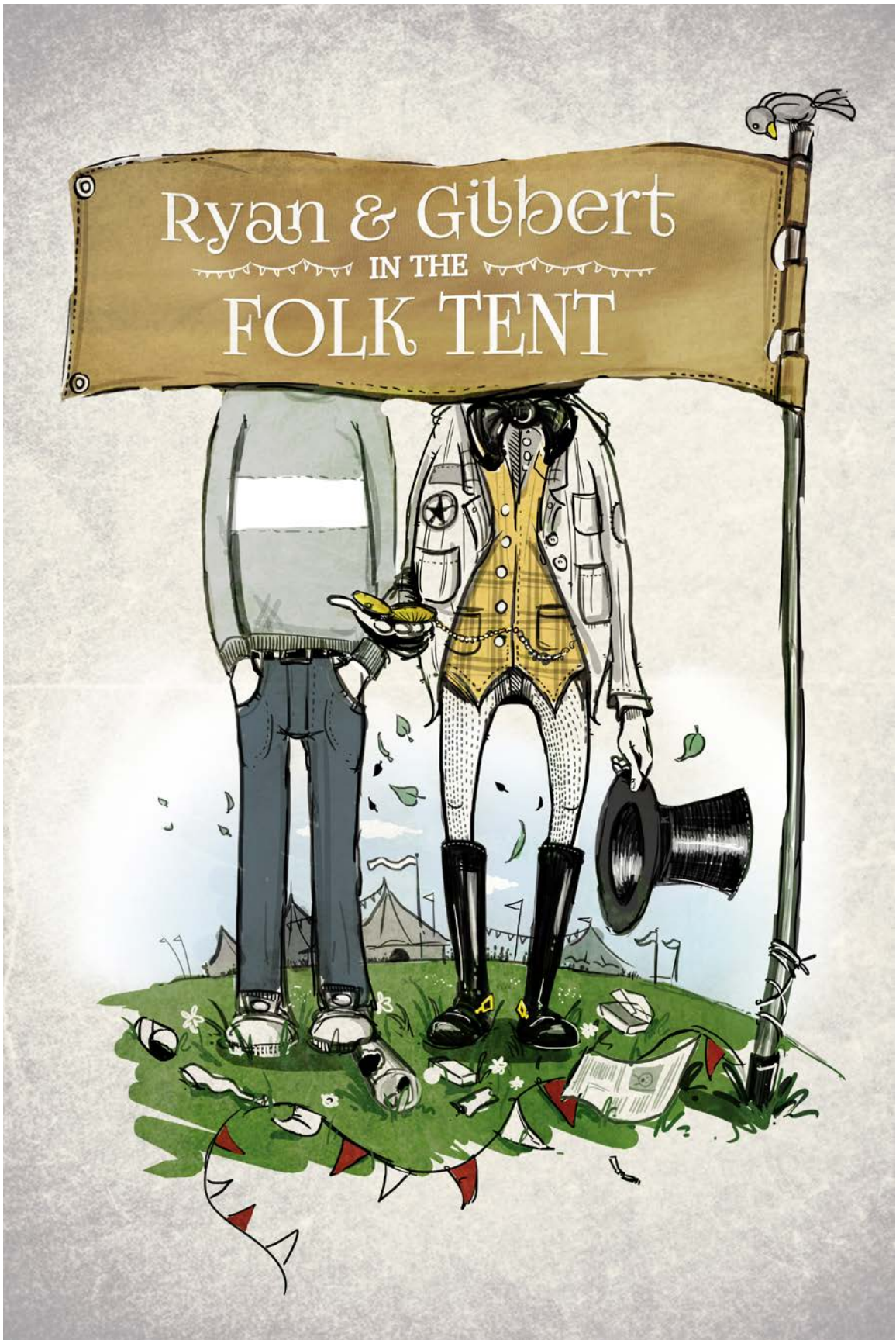


Ryan & Gilbert
IN THE
FOLK TENT



Ryan and Paulie both considered telling Gilbert that they thought he was taking the issue of clothing rather more seriously than was necessary, but neither of them could find a way of phrasing it that wouldn't earn them a disdainful look. Besides, they both knew very well now that Gilbert *took* things seriously. His way of doing so wasn't always serious.

The two of them sat in Gilbert's living room for closer to twenty minutes than fifteen, drinking all the while, and they were pleasantly fortified when Gilbert presented himself ready. That probably wasn't the best condition in which to see him wearing a bright lilac waistcoat with a gold watch chain, top hat and knee-high black leather riding boots, but Ryan in particular had a lot of experience and could restrict his reaction to a perfectly benign smile. "Here we go, then," he said. Gilbert guided them downstairs.

"Paulie, do you know roughly what the line-up is?" Gilbert asked. The latter trotted out the names of some local bands, few of which were known to Ryan and none to Gilbert. "There won't be anyone that great on the main stage," Paulie concluded. "It's all going to be either shit bands or bands that have played there the last three or four years in a row. The council doesn't take it seriously anymore." Paulie was in the early stages of an already fairly impressive career as a music promoter, and both Gilbert and Ryan knew that the city council had probably never taken the annual park festival as seriously as him. At the festival two years previous, he'd looked altogether happier than either of them had ever seen him, and without the aid of any drugs to speak of. Listening to good bands in the city park at the height of the summer really was his natural environment. If

the city had come up with some arrangement by which he could do so every day, it would have moved Paulie significantly closer to being convinced that this could ever be his home.

They walked to the festival; it wasn't too great a distance, and a taxi wouldn't have been able to park anywhere close to the festival itself. After a while they melted into the flood of humanity surrounding the park, and Gilbert eagerly seized the opportunity to expound loudly and verbosely on this or that topic, literary quotations and antiquated turns of phrase pouring forth in a flood, his affectations of behaviour getting as thorough a workout as his affectations of dress. It got just the response he wanted, looks and titters and "That guy's cool" and "That guy's an idiot." Ryan was glad to see him in good condition and hoped they'd be able to get him drunk and home before the town he'd lived in all his life found a way to push him into one of his fucking miseries. Ryan himself was hoping to run into friends and talk to girls and get moderately drunk. He didn't hold out great hope for the quality of the music. He'd known even before hearing Paulie's diagnosis that if he did hear anything he liked it would be in one of the tents. Even in the festival's supposed heyday, he'd never been that moved by anything he heard on the main stage. It was the sort of stuff he'd listened to quite happily at gigs, when you could still find gigs in town, but you wanted something different at a festival. Besides, the level of personal obnoxiousness was invariably higher at the park festival than at any other outdoor music event he had ever been to. People who didn't give a shit about music were irresistibly compelled by the fact of summer to come to the park bare-chested and behaved like dickheads. The fact that terrible music was played over the loudspeakers in

between the bands themselves didn't help him feel better about it all. Standing in a field seasoned with bullying pricks listening to top forty pop songs and hoping to hell they didn't run out of beer wasn't even a music festival for Ryan. It was just an extensive reminder of where it was he lived, and he was a long way from needing or wanting that.

“I believe I can get the first round,” said Gilbert once the tents were in sight. “Alright, we'll be close to the front of the stage,” said Ryan. It was early in the afternoon, the crowd not half what it would be by the time the headliners came on, so Paulie and Ryan moved to the front without any trouble. Paulie looked over his shoulder at Gilbert as they walked. “How the fuck can he dress like that in this weather?” Ryan smiled. Sure enough, it was warmer and brighter than he'd have let himself hope for two days ago. It was always pot luck whether or not one of the two or three days of the English summer coincided with one of the days of the festival. If the music wasn't too terrible and the beer serviceable and the weather stayed like this for a little while, there was currently a 50-50 chance of him actually enjoying the day. He just wouldn't love it or hate it to the extent that Gilbert would. Jesus, why did he always have to do that? That was far more bewildering than him dressing the way that he did. Every situation he found himself in had to tie in with his ideas – shit, if ever a man had too many ideas – and either satisfy them perfectly or fall irredeemably short of them. Clinging on to an idea of what the world should be like was bloody exhausting once you hit twenty-one, and what did Gilbert gain by continuing to do so now that he was nearly twenty-five? If he made his peace with how inexcusable the bulk of the shit the world visited on us was, he would massively increase his chances of achieving something with his time. Hey, once his

money ran out, Gilbert would have to do that whether he wanted to do or not. Sitting in the absurdly over-decorated rooms of that ancient house reading obscure biographies of those writers he admired and drinking shit than no sentient human could choose to drink – port, for fuck’s sake! – was manifestly not the way forward. “Oh, Jesus, why is it my business?” thought Ryan, closing the lid on the whole question. Gilbert was Gilbert. The universe would improvise rules for him like it always had done.

Gilbert came back with the beers. “I had a shot of something in the tent,” he said as he handed them over. “Some variety of whisky. It wasn’t practical for me to carry two more down here, but we should go up there at some point and do some together.” – “Well, I’m not sure I’m up for that,” Ryan told him, “or not, yet, anyway.” – “Your decision, of course,” said Gilbert, “but I do recommend it. I’m seeing things in a more generous light even as we speak.”

“Lee texted me,” said Paulie. “Him and Bill are coming back from the offy now. Save money.”

“They’ll be wasted already, because they always are, and they’re the only people we know to talk to, so I hope the music’s good.” Ryan told nobody anything they weren’t aware of, but it was a legitimate issue. So many of their contemporaries had left town and more followed them every month. The ironclad slackers and professional drug abusers were often satisfying company – the bulk of them were perfectly good sorts, as Gilbert often said – but it was somewhat dispiriting to observe the shared characteristics of the

people who were still living here. In short, they were the people who were genuinely incapable of going somewhere else.

“Well, there’s an outside chance that somebody we *don’t* know will talk to us,” said Gilbert. “There’s even some possibility that they’ll be worth talking to. People of value can’t be that low on the ground. I really think we’re prone to forgetting just how many people have come to a town like ours over the years. People from all over the country, from all over the world, started coming here in the sixties, and they still do. The chances of some of them having produced children who grew into worthwhile human beings are quite high. We’re jaded. I suspect. Or, well, that’s what I would rather believe.” Ryan considered the perspective for a second before saying, “Well, I’m sure things aren’t much better anywhere else.” Gilbert nodded emphatically, but Ryan was already dissecting his own words. Did he really believe that there wasn’t a place in the world where you didn’t have to worry about being continuously bothered by jerks, where you stepped out of your door every morning with a chance of meeting somebody who you would be interested in getting to know? He’d dreamt vividly enough of getting to such a place for a large enough chunk of his life. If he was flirting, as he had done recently, with the idea that the place he lived in was no worse than anywhere else, defeatism was as likely as realism to be behind it.

The first band of the day was traditionally some newcomers who hadn’t been together very long, although this year’s example were even more unvarnished than had been anticipated. The music wasn’t bad, exactly – mainly original songs, Blink 183 (3?) kind

of stuff, played with the right level of involvement, but Christ, they looked about nine years old, and you could see the fear and excitement in their every movement. “Well, why not?” Ryan rebuked himself. “This is an important moment for them. Hopefully people will be exhilarated as they listen to it, what’s so improper about the musicians being openly exhilarated while they play it?” *People* were meant to be exhilarated when they heard it. People. Not him.

The sun was bright enough to keep Ryan where he was after Paulie responded to a text and went to one of the nearby pubs, but Gilbert simply couldn’t stay still any longer. The quality of the music was a negligible factor: the main stage simply wasn’t his correct environment. Much as he enjoyed people noticing his performance – he wouldn’t have dressed as he did otherwise – he was more aware this year than he had been previously of a certain non-receptiveness among the crowd. He was dressed differently to them and he was yet to satisfactorily state his reasons. The resultant, palpable feeling that he didn’t really have a right to be there could all too easily tip into hostility. (If he was aware of how strange it was to behave in such an extroverted way when concentrated attention often made him uncomfortable, he certainly spent a lot of energy on not acknowledging it.) “I think I might take a look around,” he said, his tone of voice letting Ryan know just how uncomfortable he was, and the latter was immediately annoyed at himself for not having realised quicker. “Well, alright,” he said gently. “I’ll come and look for you soon.” Gilbert nodded and speeded into the crowd, somehow reminding Ryan of Peter Rabbit as he did so. Ryan didn’t feel any of his anxiety: actually, he was feeling more and more relaxed. He let the beer and the average music solidify into a memory, just as he

had three or four defining memories for every previous year of the festival. It was a comforting private tradition. It was just odd to still be accumulating memories of this rather than of something else. Of course, if he could articulate what that something else was, he might be closer to achieving it than he currently was.

Gilbert carried four drinks with him into the folk tent. He found a corner, put them on the floor and removed his jacket. He then downed his two shots and began on the first of his ales. The shade, his top hat and the ale combined to relieve the heat a little. There were six or seven other people spread throughout the unusually spacious tent, and one or two of them smiled at him pleasantly, but beyond that made no attempts to interact with him. A scratchy old blues recording was playing. Gilbert hadn't heard it before but in that moment felt like he had. A banjo and a leathered voice. "Tomorrow will be Monday and I'll neither have a dollar nor a friend." The musicians wouldn't arrive for at least ten minutes or so, and Gilbert certainly didn't propose to leave until he'd finished both of his ales, so he undertook to stay in just this corner for a while to come. He got extremely comfortable extremely quickly. Everything was so much more to his liking in here. Nothing in the way of oppressive light: indeed, there was just enough light to see by. The music charming and quiet, its effect on the senses coming as much from its context as itself. The flap on the door thick and stiff, parting only with the greatest heave and then collapsing to exclude the sunlight again. What he liked about it, then, was that here the city forced nothing on him. Here it gave him ample space to fill with his imagination. He could decide for himself what was happening outside the tent, just as he longed, all the time, knowingly and unknowingly, to decide for himself what his city was and not

contend with other people's ugly, dangerous ideas of what it was or should be. That was exactly what he liked about his house: that was why he spent so much of his time there these days. A city or a country is born out of a cluster of different ideas and motives. If it disintegrates or ceases to function or tears itself apart it's because those million different thoughts cannot co-exist. What have you got to fear when the ideas are all yours? That was what he had done to his life. How childish it seemed when looked at it in just that way: he'd excluded other people's ideas from his life so they didn't tread on his own. But nobody could blame him, he was sure they couldn't, when they sincerely considered what had come of other people's ideas. Well-considered and passionately held ideas are gorgeous songs and poems and enduring cultures and towns and cities that support the fullest and most encouraging flowerings of humanity. Childish ill-founded ideas are selfishness and cruelty and looted cities and poverty. Gilbert felt that he could be proud. *His* city, even if it consisted just of him, was as solid as it could be. And to think: he might never have known he was capable of building and maintaining it if he and the real world hadn't fallen out as violently as they had.

He stood exactly where he was as the tent filled up, drinking steadily, paying nobody the least heed, until finally interaction was foisted upon him. With less and less room in the tent, a girl with short red-dyed hair and a Winnie the Pooh handbag could find nowhere else to stand and thus perched next to him; as was his instinctive habit, he smiled courteously. She returned the smile and said, "I hope this is worth it." He said, "Well, I don't know anything about the band." – "Kind of a Sigur Ros type vibe, I'm told," she said. Gilbert nodded. He'd heard of Sigur Ros. "I have to ask," she said.

“What’s up with the clothes?” He was glad he hadn’t had to wait long. His smile brightened. “I’m an aesthete,” he said.

She laughed and gave no signal that she understood the word. “You’re an aesthete?”

“Yes indeed, but an aesthete permitted a historical perspective. Thus I can crib the top hat of a Belle Epoque Parisian gentleman, the waistcoat and chain of a mid-nineteenth century man of letters, the boots of Sir Arthur Wellsley – of course – and make them all my own.”

She smiled appreciatively. “And do it in 2012, and do it here.”

“Here is what I have,” he said, fairly quietly. That wasn’t something he enjoyed acknowledging in any more detail than was necessary. Then, a little louder, “Quite the crowd.”

She smiled and shrugged: “Neh. It’s not London. Being fair, though, gigs there end really early.”

He said, “How I’d love to live there.”

She said, “I don’t think I can do it much longer. Everyone there is such a dickhead. I mean, yeah, you meet a few nice people, but you only meet them once. You meet the

dickheads a million times over. And the whole city has really stupid patterns of behaviour that you've got to fall in to, and you just get so sick of trying to conform to them." The girl's name was Tara, and she had much more in this line, and Gilbert was more than happy to listen to her problems, since he couldn't articulate his own and since they let him see into someone else's world for a moment.

She was drinking too, of course, and when the band did come on and start playing this perfectly pleasing, nicely fierce and tortured guitar-based folk music – a bearded young fellow on an acoustic and a pretty girl on a balalaika – they continued talking, or she talking and he listening, until she said, "Come and dance with me," and dizzy though he was, he had enough presence of mind to dictate the style of dance, so that the two of them swayed back and forth in an odd pastiche of a waltz, so that music and fellowship and drink, far too much drink, aligned perfectly in his head and as the balalaika solo rang out he held her close and sang quietly in her ear. Words of his own:

"The wayfarers wonder, the soldiers advance,
The workers move briskly to seize the day's chance,
The conqueror reaches cross ocean and land,
The gentleman fights where he stands."

And Tara smiled with a warmth and joy that was completely new and the two of them, drunk on this or that intoxicant, comprising distinct levels of foolishness and embodying

between them not the least fucking hope for anything beyond the next two minutes or ten minutes or sixty, danced.

“I’m going to fucking move.” Ryan was somewhat drunk himself at this point. “I’ll fucking move. I always say I will and then I don’t.” Why didn’t he? All kinds of practicalities, but practicalities were things that you invoked when the other things weren’t coming together. And my God, when you considered how ambitious he’d been, how ambitious *all* of them had been, Gilbert and all of those other guys, some of whom were by their own standards doing well, some of whom were stoned. That’s why he and Gilbert were friends, he’d always thought: an ability to see beyond this town. The fact that neither of them could actually *leave* the town had him wondering just what he and Gilbert were actually about. Friendship needed a basis, for God’s sake, or we’d just fall in with whoever happened to be in front of us, and that wasn’t what he did, was it? Surely that wasn’t how he’d lived his life. Surely.

“...standing around watching this guy dancing in the folk tent with his girlfriend.” He heard it from a kid talking to his mate. “It is pretty hypnotic. Although that’s probably because of his hat.” Ryan laughed to himself. The folk tent.

He didn’t actually go in there until he’d been to the beer tent and got two ales. They were just about as big as he wanted. Walking into the folk tent, Ryan saw the tail end of the dance he’d heard about, and was undeniably relieved to see that Gilbert hadn’t cruelly bended the laws of existence by becoming an astonishing mover. It was a dignified mutt

of a shuffle-waltz, less *Step Up*, more *My Darling Clementine*. At the end of the song and thus the dance, Gilbert and Tanya looked at each other and then laughed, heartily, for a long while. She moved forward and hugged him. He held her for a long beat. Ryan was intrigued by how comfortable he looked, knowing that Gilbert simply wasn't one to hold or to touch, except in quite extraordinary circumstances. Then Tanya stood back and curtsied, Gilbert bowed, and she walked out of the tent. Gilbert's eyes were watching her retreat through the closing gap in the tent when he saw Ryan. He was still smiling, and he nodded to Ryan. Ryan flattered himself that he was there when he needed to be. Gilbert walked to the back of the tent, fielding some stray applause for his footwork, and stood a comfortable distance away from the crowd with Ryan. Ryan handed Gilbert his ale and said "Drink deep, old boy." They touched glasses and drank and, for a moment, Ryan felt, were not at all concerned with anything. Time slowed down. Ryan didn't know how much later it was when somebody emerged from the tent and he saw the beginnings of rain. Oh, fuck. Before too long it would pour down with rain and everyone at the festival would crowd into the tent, soaking wet, steaming drunk, loud and graceless as you fucking like. He looked at Gilbert, as drunk as any front row bare chest peacock outside, and saw that he hadn't noticed. He decided very quickly not to tell him. Their drinks were far from finished.