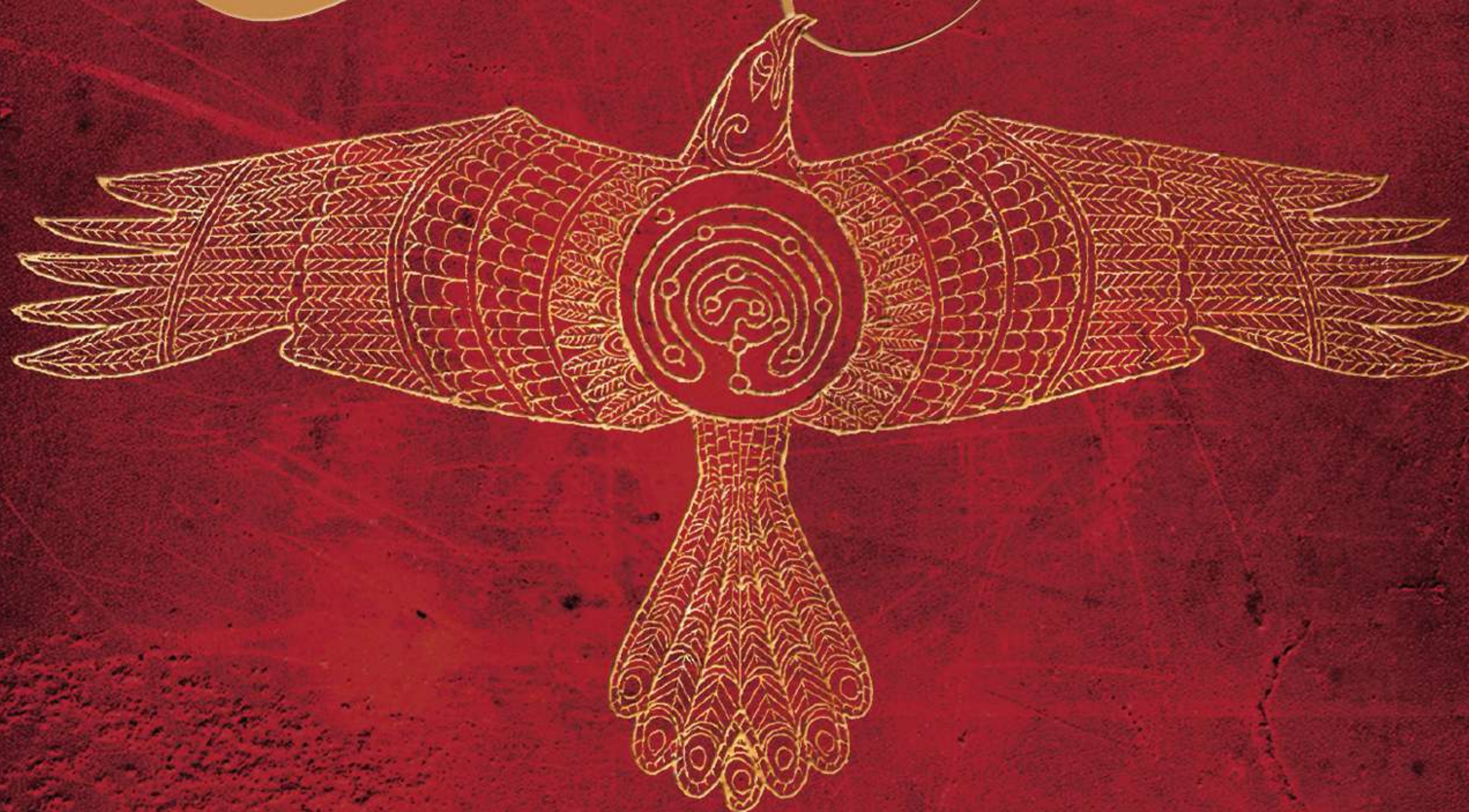


THE STRANGER'S GUIDE TO

Calliston



JOHN TARROW



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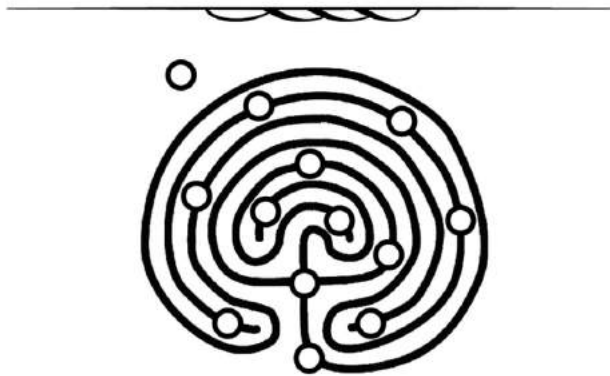
ALL GODS' DAY (MIDNIGHT)

NO. 51 NEWTON GREEN

GREAT DUNMOW, ESSEX, UNITED KINGDOM

NOW

O



ALL GODS' DAY (MIDNIGHT)
NO. 51 NEWTON GREEN
GREAT DUNMOW, ESSEX, UNITED KINGDOM
NOW

THE BOY LIVED ALL ALONE in an old abandoned school bus in the middle of a wooded roundabout. His father had once called it the magic roundabout, but the boy didn't know why. He wanted to believe in magic, just like his mother. But if magic did exist, it certainly didn't exist anywhere around here.

The boy's name was Joseph, but everyone called him Joe. Everyone meant his father and mother – and the strangers that offered them sanctuary on the road. For as long as he could remember, Joe's parents had been on the run. Thomas and Laverna Darkin never stayed anywhere for very long, and everywhere they did, they found a safe house where they could lie low in emergencies. The bus was one of those places and where Joe had gone on the night he and his parents

were attacked. The roundabout was large and densely packed with trees so tall that travellers to the motorway or the airport or the nearby villages and towns never knew the boy and the bus were there at all. Like the wood, the bus was there long before the overpass, the roads and the tarmac that surrounded it, and now both the trees and the vehicle were intertwined. His father said the bus was hiding in plain sight, and the boy knew everything there was to know about *that*. He spent every day hiding in plain sight.

On the night of the attack, his father's last words to him were, "Go, son, run! Go to the hideout and never look back. We'll get there when we can." Joe had done as he said, and he hadn't seen them since. That was a very long time ago, but as he had no electricity to power anything, he didn't know the date, and sometimes not even the day of the week. He got up when he woke and went to bed when it got too dark to see or do anything. The boy could not be certain how long he had been living rough in the bus. All summer at least. Joe spent every night fearing his parents would never come back for him.

And every day Joe spent following The Rules.

To keep him safe, his father had made his son memorise a whole heap of dos and don'ts. These weren't the usual things like 'Always Eat At The Table' and 'Don't Jump On The Sofas'. It was strange stuff, like 'Formulate Contingency Escape Routes' and 'If It Howls, Feed It'. Over time, Joe had simplified that list and now it looked like this:

RULE #1: NOWHERE IS SAFE

RULE #2: ALWAYS HAVE A WAY OUT

RULE #3: BE INVISIBLE

RULE #4: DON'T MAKE FRIENDS

RULE #5: DO NOT TALK TO DEAD PEOPLE

Then there was the most important rule of all. The One Rule To Ring Them All. The rule Joe must *never* break.

A GOOD BOY TAKES HIS MEDICINE

Joe had been born sick. He had a rare disease that had a very long name and meant that if the boy placed too much strain on his body, his heart would break and he would die. The doctors had discovered this when he was five, during hospital visits after a bad accident. To treat this condition, Joe had a bottle of medication that he had to take every thirteen hours. No matter if it was midnight or breakfast or when Joe was in the bath or taking a dump. Joe wore a clockwork timer around his neck and when the countdown reached zero, wherever he was, whatever he was doing, he had to take his medication. It was another rule on top of all the other rules. The rules that governed every day of his stupid existence. Joe lived his life by these two truths: The Rules kept him safe and The Medicine kept him alive.

Which had been all well and good until today. Because this afternoon he had drained the last mouthful of the thick, white, foul-tasting liquid. Now the ribbed brown bottle was empty and had to get some more. Automatically Joe had twisted the timer to thirteen and it began its countdown, quietly ticking away his final hours.

It was a curiously warm evening, stuck somewhere between summer and autumn, and the boy prepared to head out to the nearby town. He'd finished all the bottled water and his stores of crisps and baked beans were also dangerously low. Being a teenager and with all the normal children back at school, Joe tried not to be spotted outside during the day. He couldn't use his bike and he couldn't go scavenging. So he was waiting for that perfect time between after school and before dark, when a boy on his bike with a bag of shopping

would seem like the most natural thing in the world. Though there was emergency cash at the bus, he used it sparingly, preferring instead to scavenge what he could. He had no prescription and nothing save the label on the bottle to identify The Medicine. Still, he had to try even if it meant throwing a brick through a chemist's window and braving the consequences. He knew he had to go before he got too weak or too desperate.

So now Joe sat outside beside his mountain bike and waited for dusk. While he waited, he played with his Wolverine action figure. The maverick superhero was who Joe wanted to be. With his super-strength and super-healing, Wolverine never quit. His skeleton of pure adamantium never tired or wore down. His ability to regenerate pretty much any part of himself within seconds made him invincible. Joe sighed, envious to own even a millionth of the superhero's abilities. Life wouldn't be so dark and ugly then. It would be unthinkably brilliant.

In the deepening twilight, the school bus shone bottle green, edged with a curved crown of rust. The front ended in a large snout, while the rear was one big doorway, shielded by a sagging fabric porch. Inside all the seating had been unbolted and pushed against the walls, making space for a table and for sleeping. There was a plaque by the front door that announced the bus had been manufactured by GMC Truck & Coach Division in Michigan, USA.

"This bus is American," his father had told him. "It's 1940s, judging by the shape of it. I guess it came over in the war, got parked in this wood and now it's never gonna leave."

I know how it feels, thought Joe. It's abandoned and alone, just like me.

It hadn't always been like this. When Joe was very young and they lived in Cornwall, his parents took him everywhere. But that world felt a million miles away, and the boy rarely allowed himself to think

of that golden age before the wood and the bus. Yes, he was lonely and scared. He went hungry most days. But the worst feeling wasn't being lonely or scared or hungry. It was the knowledge that this was all his fault. He was to blame for being cast aside like a broken toy.

The thought of leaving the wooded roundabout filled him with dread, while in his mind his parents' voices rang like great bells of doom.

"We can't protect you, son, if you don't follow The Rules," his father said.

His mother added, "The doctors can't cure you, if you don't take The Medicine."

Joe's forehead beaded with sweat. His hands shook. In the quiet of the clearing, his fragile heart hammered. Anxiously the boy fumbled for the timer. As he held it in his slick palm he saw the marker was already well past seven. He had to go.

His mother had said that the longest a murdered person had lain unidentified was on a roundabout and this made the hideout a safe place. Even when winter came – and Joe was not looking forward to that at all – the bus would be all but invisible from the road. For now the wood was filled with crisp copper leaves, only just hinting at the scarlet and faded gold they would become. Joe concentrated on the leaves and calmed his rising panic.

With barely a sound of beating wings, the dark form of the crow appeared on the table beside where the boy was sitting. Griswald was his only friend, the solitary companion the boy allowed himself. It was easily the biggest bird he had ever seen, though where that strange name had come from he had no idea. Had he heard his father use it once? The crow was a frequent visitor to the farmhouse and had found this secret camp the first day Joe had arrived here.

"Cr-r-ruck," croaked Griswald as he landed upon the side of the table.

"Yes, of course I'm still here," said Joe. "No one's come back today." The crow clucked as if scolding him, tapping the table with his formidable beak. "I'm not like you. I can't just up and fly away. If I do, how will they ever find me?" This was how their conversations went, with Joe imagining the crow's cawing and chattering as questions and reprimands. "Do you think they're ever coming back? Maybe they feel they're better off without me."

The crow stood so close Joe could easily reach out and touch him, though the boy decided against it. That long scimitar beak looked far too dangerous. The bird let out a longer cry. He sounded hungry. Joe showed Griswald his empty hands.

"No food," he said, and shrugged. "Maybe later."

The bird responded by hopping backwards, then bobbing and staring at Joe as if trying to tell him something. In the creature's black eyes all of Joe's world – the bus, the wood and himself – was reflected, like a life drowned in a bottomless lake. It was all the boy could do not to shout, "I know! It's all my fault! I'm responsible for this mess. A good boy should always take his medicine." The two regarded each other for a moment more, then with a flow of dark wings, the bird was gone. As he vanished, Griswald filled the wood with another echoing croak, and this one definitely sounded nothing like a caw for food.

This one sounded like a warning.

Off through the trees, branches snapped. Something was approaching. Mum! Dad! It was them. They were back!

With a sudden burst of blue and red, a dozen sirens filled the wood from end to end with sound and light. Joe leapt to his feet in terror. Instantly the trees were alive with shadows as searchlights seared away the gathering darkness and filled it with blazing brightness. Struck cold with fear, Joe froze like a rabbit in headlights. He stifled a cry for help, knowing a trap had been sprung. It wasn't his parents. No one was coming for him. He had to do this on his own.

Just like he had on that last night with his mother and father.

With luck, he was all set to leave. Grabbing his rucksack, Joe swung the pack over his shoulder and straddled his bike, then was off. Pedalling as fast as he could, he headed away from the sirens and the searchlights, muttering, "Rule Two. Rule Two. Always Have A Way Out," under his breath. Large shapes moved between the trees, a ring of people closing in on all sides except one. The grassy escarpment that led to the overpass. Thankfully he'd spent many hours planning contingency escape routes and he was sure of his path. Taking a self-cleared dirt track, Joe dropped gears and pumped furiously as the route started to rise steeply. Suddenly he felt a sharp pain in his chest. It was his heart. Without his medication, overexerting himself could be fatal. The boy dismounted and pushed the heavy bike up the slope. Snatching glances behind him, he grabbed only glimpses of his pursuers. They all wore hooded coats, their faces just black pits. Joe didn't know how they had found the hideout, knew only that he had to escape. If only he had more medicine.

At the top of the escarpment Joe climbed back on his bike and headed down the hill. Pedalling faster and faster as he descended, he ducked torch beams and then he was freewheeling off the pavement, past the white sign that read PRIORY WOOD ROUNDABOUT and across three lanes of traffic. Cars swerved and lorry horns blared. The boy winced at the thought of being pulverised under their enormous tyres, but gravity was in control now. Somehow he wasn't crushed or hit. Instead he careered the wrong way down a littered filter lane, up another bank and into a cluster of trees.

With the bus and the roundabout hideout discovered, Joe had no idea of where he should go. Initially his only thought was of escape. Now he stopped, dismounted and dragged the mountain bike into the V-shaped channel of a disused railway line maps named the Flich Way. The tracks were gone, leaving behind a weed-choked hollow that ran

all the way from the motorway alongside the villages. Joe knew this was risky – for a kid on a bicycle this would be a fairly obvious route – but the base of the cutting was relatively flat and obstacle-free. Most importantly it kept him off the roads.

In his mind, he heard his mother yelling, “Stop snivelling! You did this. You brought this on yourself. On all of us.” He knew she was right. He’d brought all this upon them.

Joe shivered as the evening turned ever colder. Where should he go? Lifting his sweaty palms off the handlebars, he focused on what he’d been taught on making critical decisions under pressure. In a crisis situation even if you were scared or hurt or people were dead and dying, doing nothing was not an option. It all boiled down to doing something. To making a decision. He needed The Medicine. He needed food and shelter, a place to hide. All those things were found in the town. He had to head for Great Dunmow.

The boy felt sick to his stomach just thinking about it, but it seemed to tick all the boxes. Before the bus and the attack, Joe and his parents had lodged in an isolated farmhouse on the edge of the market town. It was the last place he’d seen his parents. He didn’t want to return there – not after what had happened – but he could think of nowhere else to go.

Passing under old Victorian railway bridges, he made his way slowly east. Joe would have killed to have Wolverine’s ability to pinpoint an enemy and sense incoming danger right now. A couple of times he heard the gunning of car engines in the night and once he hid in a thicket as torch beams darted overhead in the trees, but otherwise he heard and saw nothing.

Well after dark, Joe emerged from the old railway line, wheeled his muddy bike over a wooden plank bridge and back onto the road that led into the town. The night was clear and though there were stars, there was no moon. Now was the hard part. He knew how to

blend in, but the problem was that in these empty streets, at this hour – he guessed it must be approaching ten o'clock, maybe even as late as eleven – not raising suspicions would be tricky. A young boy on a bicycle would be something noteworthy. Especially to those in an official capacity.

Level head, he thought. Eyes straight. Remember The Rules.

Nowhere Is Safe. Always Have A Way Out. Do Not Talk To Dead People.

'Dead People' was what the boy called everyone else. He imagined all the people on the planet were now flesh-eating zombies and it turned the task of avoidance and evasion into a game. That way if he ended up meeting people he was trying to avoid or was trapped in an awkward situation, it gave him a way to respond.

Even when he had taken The Medicine, he rarely ran. A fast person was far more noticeable than a slow person. He had to avoid bumping into people who would ask if he was lost or where he was going. To avoid these questions, he'd been taught to slow down, look thoughtful and move with purpose.

Entering the edge of the town, Joe kept his head down and cycled on. He passed a guesthouse and saw he was heading towards a thatched pub. Outside smokers crowded the area beside the car park.

Look straight ahead, he told himself. Steady, natural pace.

Before him a sleek black car was parked half in the car park, half across the pavement. Its bonnet was stuck right across Joe's path. A bald man was standing beside the vehicle talking with the regulars. In his hand he held a large torch, and seeing this Joe's throat tightened. Without thinking he started cycling a little faster and at that exact moment the figure looked up and right at him. The boy's heart leapt and he swerved involuntarily out into the road. It was all the indication the man needed. Immediately he jumped into the car and the engine sprang to life. Joe knew he couldn't outrun a vehicle. He needed to be

invisible. Now. Instantly he was furiously pedalling, making the wheels spin as fast as he could. He didn't look back. Immediately opposite the pub was a way off the main road, and he sped down it, desperately searching for a place to hide.

He wasn't far down the lane when Joe realised he'd made a big mistake. The narrow road led into a wide circle of semi-detached council houses set around a green. It was a dead end. There was no way out. At his back he heard his pursuer's engine and knew he only had seconds before he was caught. Swerving right, he mounted the kerb and tried to keep himself as close to the garden walls and hedges as he could. The car entered the cul-de-sac and thankfully turned left. Its headlights swept the entire green and Joe could see if he had chosen that way he would have been spotted. While this was some comfort, he also realised that he was far from safe. Once the car had made a full circuit of the road, Joe would be seen for sure.

It was then that he caught sight of the giant black bird.

Griswald was sitting on the pavement about ten feet away. In the light from the street lamps, Joe saw the bird was standing on a lump of something dead. What was he doing here? Had he killed some poor child's beloved pet? Skidding to a halt, Joe found the thing was a giant rat and probably once lived in the horror house that stood before him. For while the other properties on the green were in good repair, this one was wild and neglected. The front garden was surrounded by a hedge that was so overgrown it resembled an immense thorny thicket. It was so tall that nothing could be seen of the house except the very top of the chimney. Almost invisible in the dense foliage was a low iron gate, but even that was overgrown and twisted with brambles.

Hanging upon the gate was a big, rusted sign that read DANGEROUS BUILDING. KEEP OUT.

"Great place to hide, Griswald," the boy said, but there was no time for sarcasm. The car was almost upon him. Pushing his bike into

the hedge, Joe pressed on the gate, but found it impossible to move. Thorns cut into his hands making him flinch away. The car turned the last curve, its stark headlights already sweeping across the next-door neighbour's fence. Desperately, the boy threw his whole body against the iron gate, and this time the branches and brambles gave way. He half-fell through the dark opening, crashing to the ground. It was not a moment too soon.

Headlights shone through the leaves, illuminating where he had just been standing but finding only empty pavement. Griswald took flight, a swift silhouette against the brightness, then was gone. Closely followed by the lights and the growl of the engine.

Danger passed and Joe allowed himself to get back to his feet. He still needed The Medicine, supplies and a new place to hide, but at least for now he'd escaped.

"Don't move a muscle," said a rough, growling voice in his ear.

ABOUT THE HOUSE & GARDENS



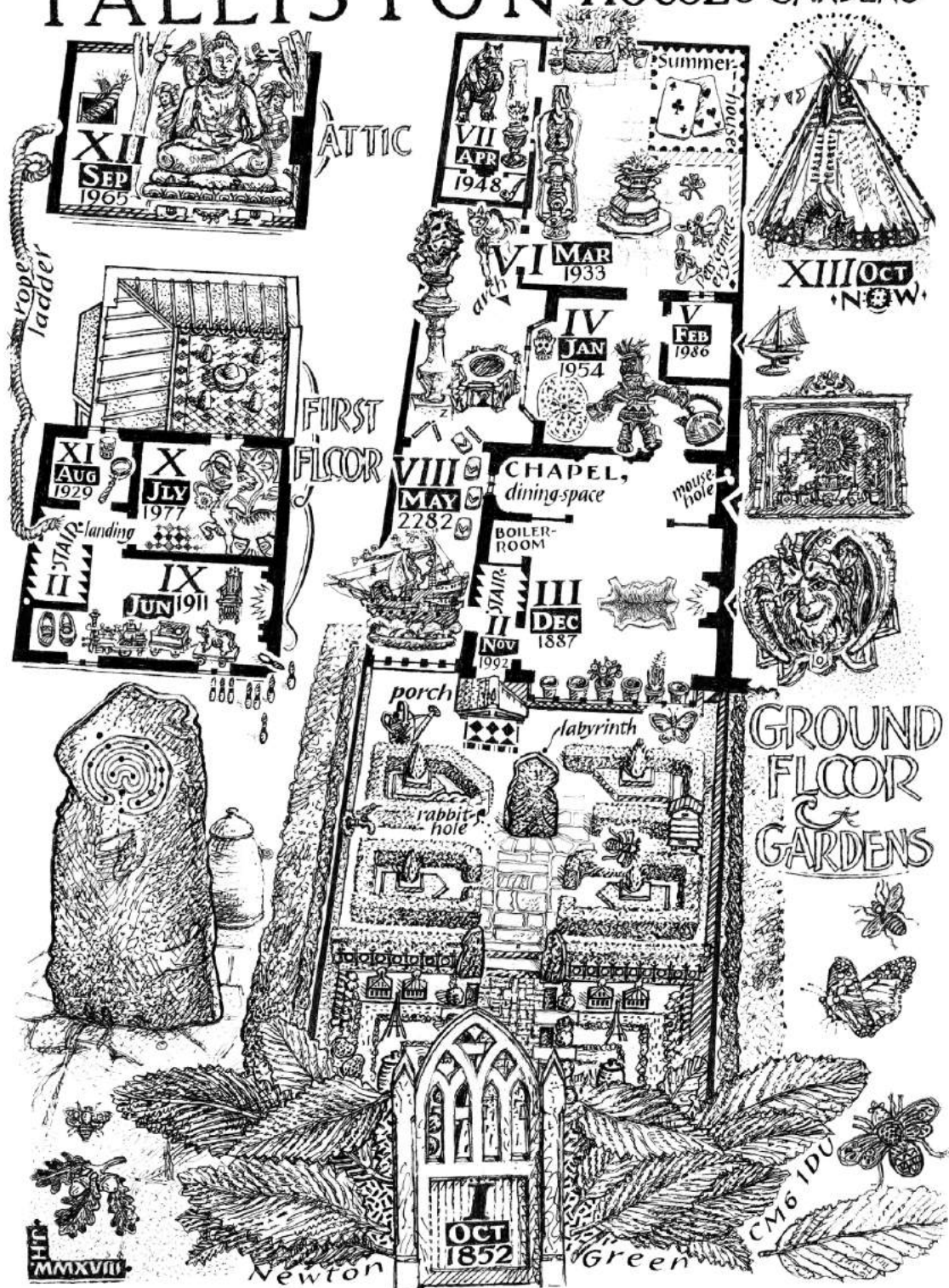
Did you realise the locations of this book exist within a quite remarkable real house and gardens?

Welcome to Talliston, a twenty-five-year project that took the UK's most ordinary house and transformed it, room by room, by ordinary people on an ordinary budget, into Britain's Most Extraordinary Home.

Starting as a three-bedroomed, semi-detached, ex-council house in Essex, today not a single square centimetre of the original house remains. In its place is an extraordinary labyrinth of locations, each set in different times and places.

This incredible and inspirational journey began when John realised the house that he wanted to live in and the house he could afford were very far apart. The project was his way of putting those two things together.

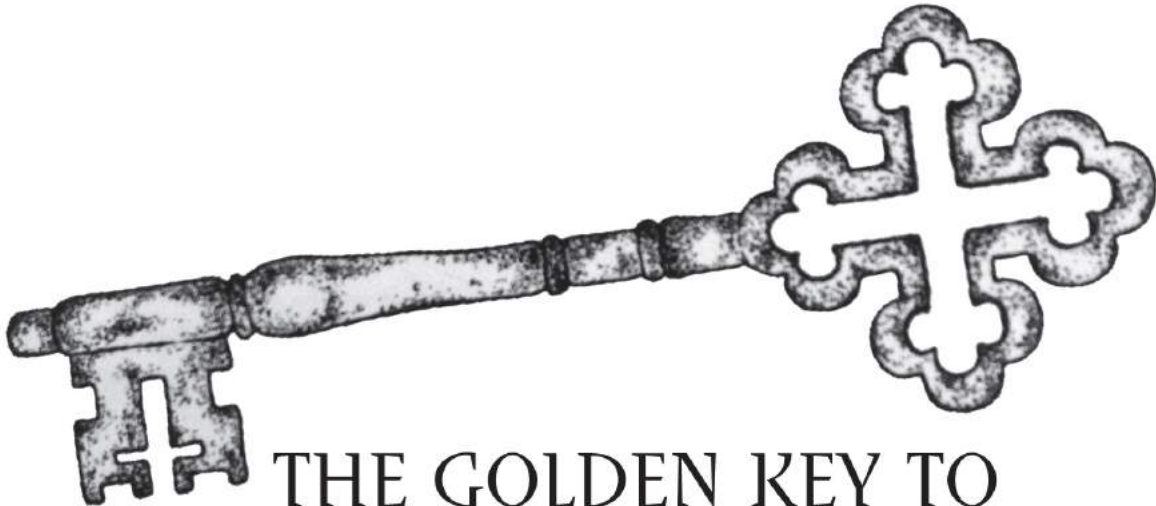
TALLISTON HOUSE & GARDENS



ABOUT THE HOUSE & GARDENS

Each room was deconstructed back to the brickwork and rebuilt from scratch, and now completed not one square centimetre of the original house remains, neither inside nor out. By walking from room to room, you find yourself leaving the present, and entering the past (and even at one point entering the future). So you too can follow Joe Darkin's journey through the labyrinth – all just by opening the house's many doors and seeing what lies behind them.

*To find out more about this incredible project or to visit
the house and gardens, go to www.talliston.com*



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Entrants must be aged 11-16 on date of entry. Only applications with an official token will be entered into the draw. All entries must be received by 30 September on any calendar year. Applications are valid for the current year's draw only. The prize is non-transferable and is only applicable to the winning entrant. Your personal details will not be shared or be used for any purpose other than this competition. Full terms and conditions online @ www.tarrow.co.uk

First published in 2019

Unbound

6th Floor Mutual House, 70 Conduit Street, London W1S 2GF

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Text Design by PDQ

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

ISBN 978-1-78352-724-3 (trade hbk)

ISBN 978-1-78352-726-7 (ebook)

ISBN 978-1-78352-725-0 (limited edition)

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK)

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2