

A Life Lesson from Jimi

by [Fiona Sinclair](#) (September 2024)



Tom first heard about it crouching over an illicit transistor built by an enterprising boy in tech class. It was breaktime, he and his mates were tucked behind the outer wall of the gym; their 'secret' hiding place teachers turned a blind eye to.

Each band Radio Caroline announced was met with a choric wail by the boys, because most knew attending the festival was a fantasy.

Except for Tom. "I could go," he thought to himself, tallying in his mind his not inconsiderable savings account, product of multiple money-making schemes including digging up lug worms, 3 paper rounds, and washing cars. Keeping the idea to himself,

in history the Plantagenets were cold-shouldered as he planned not an essay but an expedition. A train to Victoria then one down to Southampton. Radio Caroline had helpfully informed that tickets could be bought on the gate.

Tom was not a reckless boy. He had a healthy balance of curiosity and caution. However, his previous ventures had been small scale and pecuniary. This was more ambitious but, satisfying himself of the slim chances of jeopardy for the first time, but not the last, Tom shook hands with opportunity.

His cover story for mum was a last minute "I'm staying at Mark's, Friday to Monday. We're camping in his garden."

"Alright dear, have fun," she had called from the kitchen, content that her son was more worldly wise than other boys his age, sharing the raising of younger siblings whilst she worked in London and Dad skippered the pub.

"Only a white lie," he thought to himself. I'll tell her everything when I get back.

Tom had deftly deployed his knowledge of geometry to make the best use of his backpack. Tent, sleeping bag, Calor gas stove, were stashed or attached. Food, Caroline claimed, would be abundant at the site. Nevertheless, he lifted a small frying pan from a cupboard, bought bacon, sausages and chocolate. Heaving on the bulging rucksack, he resembled a miniature soldier on manoeuvres.

The trains were positively in cahoots with the boy, delivering him to Southampton without a problem. But, at the ferry port, there was an adamant sign "No unaccompanied minors." Bugger, he thought. Tom knew that he was handicapped by looking young for his age. Slight of stature, and skinny, his thick dark hair was worn long in an effort to obscure his boyish features. Nevertheless, he had never even managed to blag his way into an X rated film.

Letting his backpack slide to the ground, he leaned against some railings to ponder the problem. "I need to adopt a family," he decided, and began scanning the groups queuing for tickets like a small time conman looking for a mark. One family with a brood of kids caught his eye, particularly a boy of his own age wearing an England cricket shirt.

At school, Tom was gifted at cricket but awful at art. Each lesson, his art master gave him a free pass out of the rear door of the studio to join an informal cricket practice. Consequently, the boy knew that fellow cricketers could chew on the subject for hours.

"What do you reckon about our chances in the Ashes?" he enquired of the boy who, surrounded by younger siblings noisy as starlings, was grateful for the distraction. The parents abstracted by luggage, demands for crisps, and finding cash, did not notice this supernumerary addition to their family.

When his turn came, with a knot in his stomach large as a cricket ball, he informed the girl in the ticket booth "I'm with them" gesturing with his head. The girl was clearly suffering the effects of a heavy night out. She slid the ticket to him with a yawn. Result, he inwardly cheered.

Hordes of festival goers overwhelmed the ferry. Accustomed to 'nice' families off on camping holidays, the staff shook their heads at the girls with flowers in their locks and young men apostle-like, with their long hair and long beards that had some older passengers murmuring about "national service." But this exotic crowd was blind to disapproval as they chatted and laughed in a lexis foreign to their observers: "Hey man, dude, right on" bounded about the ship as they leant against the railings in pimped jeans and cheesecloth. Tom fizzed inside like a shaken cola. These were properly 'cool,' and made the efforts of his 6th formers to join the counterculture seem ridiculous.

At Fishbourne, he ditched his new chum with a cheery "Have a good holiday," leaving the boy open mouthed as he struck off in the direction of the festival.

Ramshackle signs, daubed in white paint, posted the way to the site. Tom hitched up his backpack and joined the cavalcade making for the entrance. Many were on foot also bearing knapsacks or hastily rolled sleeping bags like messy roulades. "Hope it doesn't rain," he chuckled to himself. Others, more fortunate, had borrowed dad's Bedford van and, of course, the posh kids swanked in their jaunty VWs. But it was the motor bikes he ogled as they growled up the corridor created for them by wary pedestrians. Their sound stirring him like a wild drum groove.

The same tightening in his stomach as he approached the entrance. But the chaotic organisation went in his favour. A group of students were red faced and frowning as they tried to calculate change in their minds or on their fingers. Hands were rubber stamped without glancing up at their owners. Tom was processed like the others and, high on relief, he jubilantly strolled into the site.



"Let's get settled first," he decided, grinning to himself. "I

sound like mum." The pitch he selected was not too close to the toilets but not too far from the stage. His tent was erected ably. The backpack stashed within. Around him, grown men struggled with the puzzle of ropes, poles and canvas. Some tents immediately swooned, others leant tipsily. Laughter accompanied their slapstick antics, peppered by the occasional "Bastard thing" and "Blood hell."

Tom tried not to appear smug, but envious looks were thrown at the boy and his more biddable tent. "How did you do that so fast kid?"

"Scouts," he explained, grateful now that his mum had cajoled him to join. He began to lend a hand. "Put the poles here, hammer the pegs there." His experience passed from pitch to pitch like the wisdom of a tent guru.

Tom had always been self-sufficient. He often sought solitary pursuits such as fishing. If other kids pitched up, he could easily strike up a casual acquaintance. Being good at sport guaranteed he was a popular boy. He did not know it then but this ability to be alone without feeling lonely was a gift. In contrast, his classmates always went everywhere accompanied by siblings or mates so that compromise often led to inaction. Answerable to no-one, Tom's horizons would always be far less inhibited.

Nevertheless, the group of 4 in the adjacent tent were marking his solo status with nudges and whispers. "You on your own?" one young man, barely 20 himself, inquired incredulously.

"Yep," he nodded.

A girl parted her curtain of blonde hair to stare at him with green eyes that, despite her youth, showed nascent maternal concern. "Any trouble and you tell us."

Thrust into the adult world early, what with his micro businesses and helping dad in the pub, by his teens he had learned to read faces like a palmist read palms. His neighbours seemed genuine. Suspecting that, in fact, he had more life experience at 14 than these students on their first holiday without parents. Names were exchanged and the boys immediately cadged a can opener.

"Look after my tent whilst I go for a wander?"

"Will do," they answered, as the youths set about opening a can of Watneys Party Seven.

Treading warily over sneaky guy ropes that tried to ambush, he weaved around groups strumming guitars, lads spread out on the ground like rugs with beers cooling in buckets of water. He caught the rank smell of weed. Billy Johnson had once pinched a spliff from a snoring brother's pocket, presented it to the kabala behind the gym. His mate Brian had been sick, and he had been immune to its active properties.

Clear of the campsite, he examined the stalls selling crystals, flimsy dream catchers and joss sticks that competed with the weed for stench, all of which he dismissed as "Hippie tat."

But the aromas from the hot dog and burger vendors did beckon to him. Tom had not eaten for hours. Often, when he was absorbed, he simply forgot to eat until his body suddenly screamed out for fuel. Now he bought a ridiculously large hot dog.

The festival's stage was a no-frills affair. Organisers were clearly gambling on good weather since there was little cover for the acts. Marshall amps clustered like heavies guarding the mics and jumble of cables. Arc lights made the best of their situation.

With his usual uncanny timing, Tom was at the front when the

event came to life. The first acts attracted only a threadbare audience. Scribblers of one hit wonders which, like a perfect ace in tennis, would never be repeated. Nevertheless, good musicians who had learned their craft the honest way, scurrying up motorways in Transit vans from venue to venue. Meeting other groups in cafes with bleary eyes and a grunted greeting. Now they belted out their numbers, hardly able to believe their luck at being on the same bill as Bolan and Dylan. Their sounds bounced around the festival fields between loudspeakers attached to trees like giant bird boxes.

The following morning, his neighbours traded eggs for bacon. One of those spontaneous friendships sprung up between them, a camaraderie born of a common interest. Conversation played easily, especially between the boys, music and sport, mostly.

Beside their tent, a Norton motorbike dozed like a cat in the sun. Tom's dream bike. The objective behind all his money-making schemes. Two years' time he would start on a lighter bike until his body caught up with his ambition. The motorcycle's owner, a leather jacketed lad called Pete, had observed the way the boy's looks were magnetically drawn to it.

"Like the Norton?"

"Love it," the boy replied in a tone of pure yearning. "One day... "

As the conversation side tracked to motorcycles, roll ups were handed around. Pete hesitated at the boy. "Want one?" The girls gasped. But Tom's smirk suggested a seasoned smoker. Another extracurricular activity behind the gym. His mates frequently pooling their pocket money and sending in the biggest lad to buy from local newsagents.

Over the following 2 days, a dizzying zoetrope of bands passed before his eyes. But the musician most lads had come to see would close the show. Tom and his new mates had dug in and

defended their position at the front for hours. Hendrix kept them waiting but there was no hard feeling amongst the crowd, who seemed to accept that genius works to its own timetable.



The guitarist strolled on around midnight. A mumbled “Hi” and a lopsided grin greeted the audience. Tom got the sense he never hurried anywhere. “Please be brilliant,” he repeated to himself like a mantra.

A signature riff shrieked like a harpy around the site. Followers roared, the unwitting were open mouthed. Tears in Tom’s eyes as, with heart rate ramped up by the music, he watched the long, elegant fingers rip up and down the guitar’s neck.

A familiar melody was the springboard for extravagant freestyling, hints of the song reappearing to reassure that the musician had not abandoned it entirely, dissolving again into more improvisation. Dissonance that somehow made sense.

More than virtuoso, there was something preternatural about this playing. Every now and then lyrics were added to the mix. Counterculture words that were parables for the times yet somehow secondary to the music, that was where the real revolution was taking place. Pure showmanship at times plucking with his teeth, complicit with the crowd pleasing in what mums would universally have called 'Showing off'. Occasionally, a look no hands trick as the guitar, worked to a frenzy, seemed to play itself. But, at other moments, Tom noticed the musician achieved a kind of ecstasy in his playing, a sublimation of sound, as if he played only for himself, and the audience ceased to be present. The last chord came too soon. He bowed like a troubadour, left the stage with an air of finality.

The lads turned and aimed for their tents. Shuffling as the crowd slowly decanted. A little dazed by the dazzling spectacle just witnessed, they were reduced to a few words.

"Genius!"

"The best!"

"Going to stop trying to play."

Almost at their camp, Tom sighed, "Oh bugger, I've left my jacket." He made his way back to the flotsam of cans, bottles, bags and t-shirts strewn across the grass. Searched the ground with his torch, turning over items with his foot. Not a hope.

"Lost something kid?"

The soft voice issued from the side of the stage. In the dusk left by the subdued super troupers he made out the outline of a figure perched on a small Marshall amp, smoking. Peering at the gold braid on the loosened hussar jacket, Tom recognised the gentle drawl at odds with the raucous voice of the musician's playing. He suddenly felt very young indeed. "My jacket," he managed to mumble.

"Bummer" came the reply.

Previously, Tom would never have considered himself as starstruck but now, all coherent thoughts seemed to have evacuated his brain. Not sure if the exchange was over, he hazarded a "Great set," hoping he did not sound too sycophantic. But the musician received the compliment with grace. "Thank you, good to hear," and with that he gestured to another amp that might serve as a perch for the boy. Taking the seat Tom barely breathed.

"Was it a good jacket?" the musician inquired?

"Not as good as yours," the boy replied.

The man grinned. "Got it in the King's Road" he patted the front frogging. Tom's curiosity began to override his initial shyness now. Enough for him to inquire why the musician was sitting there alone. The man exhaled a column of smoke but wafted it away from the boy in a courteous fashion. "Gets a bit intense up there. Always need some space afterwards."

The man certainly looked spent, compared to the vital force of some 30 minutes ago. Crumpled on the makeshift stool, his face was drained of expression. Under cover of the half-light, Tom studied the musician. He seemed younger than his stage persona, humanised somehow by the scattering of acne across his face. His hair was a charcoal smudge. It appeared to Tom that he was, at the same time, just another young man—yet there was also an uncanny air of difference about him.

"You a musician?" the man inquired, assuming every boy now attempted to strum a guitar with the ambition of becoming a rockstar. However, Tom shook his head adamantly "No." A pause then, "I prefer sport."

The guitarist's turn to stare with curiosity at the boy. It was clearly a long while since someone had spoken so honestly to him. "What kind of sports?"

"Cricket mostly," the boy responded. The man looked bewildered. "What's cricket?" Tom laughed and was at a loss to explain this game that seemed unintelligible to many in his own country.

"It's a bit like baseball," was the nearest analogy he could come up with.

"Never cared for sports," the musician chuckled. "Too lazy." They both laughed.

"Here with your folks?" the man inquired. The boy shook his head. "On my own."

A conspiratorial look crept into the man's eyes. "A maverick, eh?"

Tom went a little red at what was obviously meant as praise. Fortunately, the half-light concealed. The musician appeared to relish the temporary distraction, a chance to turn away from the crucible of his own life.

"What are your dreams for the future kid?"

Tom found himself explaining the dilemma of being the first child in his working-class family to win a place at grammar school. How his mum was ambitious for him, expecting university and a white-collar profession.

The man lit another cigarette from the embers of the previous one, and considered as he did so. "My ma was fierce, specially when I dropped out of school, but... " he nodded to the guitar propped up against a makeshift stand. "My mistress over there had other ideas." He chuckled at the memory. "My ma sort of gets it now."

The young man was clearly thinking back to that time, recalling his own predicament. "It's tricky though," he admitted. "You don't want to hurt your folks but on the other hand... " he paused.

"You don't want to end up working in a bank," Tom concluded with an emphatic smack of his lips. The pair burst out laughing, sharing the same sentiments concerning a life cooped up in an office.

Suddenly looking at the boy squarely, "But what do you want?" No one had really asked Tom this but, without missing a beat, he replied "I want to stick a pin in the map of the world and go visit."

"Like an explorer, eh? Well, strikes me you've made the first step."

The man's tone was wistful as if he envied the boy's freedom. The blank sheet of his future. Of course, Tom had read about the tangle of the man's existence. How, although only in his mid-20s, his life was already stuffed with experience, good and bad. His genius creating chaos rather than contentment. The guitar had become a demanding mistress who seemed to have the upper hand.

The musician sighed and shook his head "No point in me giving advice," he said, "but right now, your life's your own, you're not obligated to anyone." Tom had never thought of it in those terms. "No point in ordinary," the man added. "I don't think it would suit you anymore than it's suited me."

His cigarette was extinguished, and he ground the butt under his boot heel. This seemed to act as a timer for the man. He rose, picked up his lighter. "That's my cue," he said "Back to reality—and that's a whole different discussion," he grinned.

The boy rose too and spontaneously extended his hand. They shook. The musician smiled at the formality. He took a few steps, then turned and looked over his shoulder.

"You have a good life, you hear?"

"And you too, Jimi." It was the first time he had dared to use

the man's name.

The last Tom heard was a chuckle and "I'm trying to, kid." He disappeared into the darkness beyond the lights.

Tom did not career back to his tent, words spilling from his mouth. Instead, he said nothing of the encounter. "Find your jacket?" Sally asked. He shook his head. "'Bad luck," she tutted. This was the only time he could have shared his story without it being received as a tall tale. He was never sure why he kept quiet. A sense of betrayal, perhaps, blabbing about this man in an off-duty moment, who had given this boy his time. He knew, too, it would take on a life of its own being passed around the site, becoming grubbier with each gossipy retelling. When he returned to school, he knew his mates would listen with sceptical "Yea right." And as the years went by, the occurrence began to seem more like a vision than a fact.

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