A Van Full of Gandalfs

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There wasn’t much here before they made The Film. There still isn’t. Of course it’s three films, but everyone says The Film, don’t they.

I’d spent all my life in town and couldn’t wait to get away to Uni. I’m sure you know the story. Four years of fun, trying not to think too much about the future. And when the course was over, there were no jobs, not unless you knew the right people.

So I trailed back home and kicked around aimlessly for a while. The parents had told me that the place had really changed since the filming. But it didn’t seem much different to me, apart from the cheesy sign on the edge of town:

*Welcome to Hobbiton*

I didn’t feel so welcome. The parents had got used to an empty house. And all my mates from school had long since gone. I tried stacking shelves and waiting tables, but I couldn’t settle to anything. So I hitch hiked up to Hamilton and spent a morning at Career Services, filling in aptitude forms.

“Why not be a teacher,” they said at the interview. “It looks like you’ve got the temperament. And you’ve got the qualifications. There are scholarships.”

I’d always sworn I’d never be a teacher, but, with no obvious options, it seemed worth a try. So I filled in more forms and, what do you know, they gave me the funding.

There was just one catch, though; they’d got enough English teachers, so would I mind teaching Drama instead? I’d need to update my degree, of course, but there was an access programme. The programme was based on flexible distance learning so I didn’t need to be there every day, but there was another catch; it cost real money and there wasn’t any financial support.

I couldn’t see how I could fit studying around a nine to five job, even if I could find one I could stick. There was no way I’d get a loan with my debts. And the parents never had any money.

I felt helpless and trapped. I couldn’t face staying in town any longer but couldn’t leave either.

One afternoon, I was sitting listlessly in the cafe, browsing the local rag, when I saw the advert:

*Wanted.*

*Guides for Middle Earth Tours.*

*Tolkein enthusiasm and local knowledge vital.*

Well, I’d got buckets of local knowledge. And I was a Tolkein enthusiast, if a late convert.

They’d made us read The Book at school. To begin with, I really wasn’t interested: Middle Earth sounded like that awful Brit society the grandparents droned on about, where everyone in the Empire knew their rightful place.

“No,” said the teacher. “It’s about different peoples coming together as equals to fight evil. And the elves are sea farers with ancient wisdom, just like the Maori.”

So I gave The Book another go. I got a bit bored with all the battles, but the Ring Bearers’ journey kept me up night after night. At the end of the year, I wrote a blinding essay about The Book for the Bursary exam. And I got top marks, which is how I wound up studying English.

Of course I went to see The Film! Didn’t everybody here? The real enthusiasts argued endlessly about the differences between The Film and The Book, but I just liked sitting back and getting sucked into the story. A couple of my Uni friends had been skiing down in Queenstown, and said they recognised some of the locations. None of them knew anything about Matamata though.

I phoned up the tour firm the next morning and went for an interview that lunchtime. The same afternoon, I was sitting in a Land Rover, bouncing along the back roads between the fields.

I wanted to laugh when we got to the valley. Hobbiton’s a pretty enough place, surrounded by rolling green hills and crawling with sheep. But there’s really not a lot to see there, apart from some big round fibro boards dug into the hillside to look like Hobbit burrows. And the Party Tree.

The Party Tree’s where the Hobbits were supposed to hold their major celebrations, like Bilbo’s one hundred and eleventh birthday at the start of The Film. The Party Tree dominates the centre of the valley and it looks really convincing until you get up close to it. There had been a perfectly good tree on the site already but it was a native. So they chopped it down and built a brand new one, bolting together great big chunks of oak. Of course the new tree didn’t have any leaves so they bought in thousands of fake ones and stuck them on. There’s a display case of them near one of the burrows.

The driver saw my face.

“You’ll see,” he said. “They’ll love it.”

And he was right.

Back at the office, they asked me a few more questions about my availability and told me I’d got the job. Then they gave me an official looking uniform and sent me away to learn the tour script. While I was waiting for them to sort out my driving license, I registered for the access programme and picked up my first study pack. A week later, I was shuttling visitors to and from Hobbiton in a minibus.

To begin with, the bus was full of pensioners and young families, on day trips out of Tauranga and Rotorua. Often they seemed more interested in the cream teas in town than Hobbiton, and didn’t even get out of the bus, let alone pay any attention to my spiel about the filming.

Occasionally there were young couples from the Far East on their honeymoons. They would ask me to walk round the site with them, taking their photographs. Some couples sent me postcards from their next destinations – Samoa, Tahiti, Hawaii, Easter Island. I’d never been further than Wellington. I wished I could afford to travel, and that spurred me on to finish the access course.

Then the true believers began to arrive. Young Europeans on gap years. Lots of Brits, of course, but increasingly Germans and Scandinavians. They were far more enthusiastic than the day trippers, and they even listened politely to my script. But mostly they wanted to talk about The Book. I thought I knew the story back to front, but I didn’t know the back story. They did though.

My employers were relaxed about the shifts I worked, and I was making good progress with the distance learning. But I felt increasingly embarrassed that the fans knew so much more about my specialist subject than I did. So I started reading Tolkein’s other books. And I read up about the man himself.

Tolkein turned out to far more interesting than the tweedy looking academic in the black and white pictures. Before he wrote The Book, he’d fought on the Western Front, just like so many of our ANZACs. When I next re-read The Book, I remembered my great-granddad’s harrowing stories of No Man’s Land. Now the battles felt so much starker.

After they’d released the final film, more and more North Americans came to Hobbiton. Quite often they were newly retired, taking the big overseas trip they’d always promised themselves. They’d rush around the site, snapping photos of each other, posing in the burrow windows and under the Party Tree. But they’d come for The Film, not The Book, and they wanted to know all about the celebrities. Had I met Viggo Mortenson or Orlando Bloom? Where did Cate Blanchett and Liv Tyler stay in town? Was it true that Peter Jackson going to make a James Bond movie? Where was the best place to buy souvenirs? I knew the answer to the last one.

That winter there was another change. The latest visitors didn’t just want to see the film set; they actually wanted to be in Middle Earth. These visitors came in home made costumes: Hobbits; Black Riders; Gandalf the Wizard; Elves, with pointy ears that made them look like Mr Spock from Star Trek. They knew The Film by heart, and would try to video themselves acting out scenes, arguing about what had happened where. Sometimes it was hard to get them back onto the bus.

One fine day, a van full of Gandalfs came over from Hamilton: engineering students raising money for charity. The Gandalfs were crammed into the back of the van, pumped up fit to burst. They must have been drinking since they left the campus. They stank of beer, and their cotton wool wigs and beards were falling to pieces.

All the way to Hobbiton, the Gandalfs loudly sang rugby songs, thumping out the tempo with their wooden staves. As soon as we arrived at the car park, they piled out of the minibus, wrapped themselves in their black bin-bag cloaks, and danced hand in hand round the Party Tree.

An elderly man slowly came forward from the rear of the bus. I hadn’t noticed him at all when we were leaving town; he must have got on just as the Gandalfs arrived. His white hair and beard were neatly trimmed, and he was wearing a long black button-down gown like an Orthodox priest’s.

I tried to apologise for the noisy journey, but he waved me aside. He cautiously stepped down from the bus, leant on his walking stick and surveyed the site, shaking his head sternly.

“It wasn’t like this at all,” he muttered to himself. “Not at all.”

Then he tipped his old Akubra down to shade his eyes, and walked across the valley towards the burrows, keeping well away from the Gandalfs.

Under the Party Tree, the Gandalfs had stopped dancing and were trying to form a human pyramid. For engineering students, they had a poor grasp of structures. All the smallest Gandalfs were on the bottom row and the largest Gandalf was trying to haul himself up to the top.

On the hillside in front of the burrows, the elderly man stood stock still, staring straight down at us. When I first saw him at the back of the bus, I had been struck by his quiet dignity. Now he seemed gaunt, commanding, menacing.

As I shouted at the Gandalfs to stop, the pyramid tottered. Flailing around drunkenly, the top-most Gandalf grasped at a branch. The branch broke and the pyramid toppled.

I screamed at the Gandalfs, who, suddenly sober, sheepishly brushed themselves down and got back onto the bus. I looked around for the elderly man but he was nowhere to be seen. Then I picked up the broken branch and peered anxiously up at the Party Tree. Maybe someone could mend it. Maybe they wouldn’t dock my pay.

Crying *Hokioi, Hokioi*, a huge white eagle launched itself from the top of the Party Tree and flew off south across the valley. Startled, I looked back at where the branch had been. From the frayed gash in the trunk, a new branch had sprouted, covered in bright green leaves and fat, shining acorns.