

Stop Talking

Sam Johnston

Dedicated to
Jason Haines and Paul Cornish

With huge thanks to Mum and Dad for their
invaluable and unyielding help in editing
throughout the project, and to Amber, for her
support and psychological expertise.

Cover by Will Johnston: Printed November
2006

A Lapse in Judgement

‘Sit down!’ he roared.

At a little over eighty decibels and with a tone that told you this was a voice used to being obeyed, the command of the young teacher should have had more effect on the runt of a twelve-year-old who, inch-by-provocative-inch, lowered himself gradually into his chair. The impish Year 8 pupil maintained a steady and defiant gaze with Mr. Langston, a mocking grin sneaking from one side of his mouth as he did so.

To look at the two of them staring each other down just a few feet apart in the crowded hut the notorious school called a classroom, you’d be forgiven for laughing. Tom Langston easily cleared six feet and was built well enough for it to show through his shirt. The boy’s bowl haircut addressed Tom’s midriff. In reality, the scene was a symptom of a school with serious problems.

It was Friday afternoon of the first week of the autumn term. The summer had been a good one for England, the end of August seeing two straight weeks of glorious sunshine and temperatures in the eighties. Tom

Stop Talking

had finished his post-graduate certificate in secondary education at the University of London in June and, after getting himself a music teaching job, had spent the rest of the summer enjoying the freedom of single life. Recently, Tom had moved to the south coast to a large town called Brentmouth, home to fish and chip shops, seedy nightclubs, stag and hen parties, and five large secondary schools.

Tom, although a newly qualified teacher – NQT, was no stranger to challenging behaviour. As a student in London, he'd dealt with plenty of kids whose sole aim in school was to make teachers' lives as miserable as possible. And they were a lot bigger and rougher than this little shit.

'Are you trying to wind me up?' Tom asked, maintaining the volume. To lose momentum in the game that is 'telling off kids' while the boy was still showing defiance would demonstrate an acceptance of his behaviour and encourage others in the class to try it on as well.

'Nope,' the boy replied.

Cheeky bastard, using the vernacular, Tom thought.

'Good! You've spent less than a minute in this classroom in the first lesson of the year, I don't know your name, and I'm about to learn it for the wrong reason. Give it to me now!'

A ripple of laughter spread through the room, and Tom winced imperceptibly. He knew you had to be careful with what you said as a teacher, or just about everything could be taken lewdly. Tom had to let it go. To get angry with the whole class, especially a low-ability Year 8 class in their first encounter last lesson on a Friday afternoon, could easily make the situation ten times worse. These children had been at the school a year and were used to baiting newcomers. Besides, he thought, stuff like 'give it to me now' deserved to be laughed at.

A Lapse in Judgement

The boy didn't miss the opportunity to pounce. 'Give *what* to you, sir?'

More laughter from the rest of the class. This was what they wanted – entertainment without risk. They didn't care if one of their classmates got into trouble, and they certainly didn't care about Mr. Langston.

'Just your name,' Mr. Langston answered. 'I have no interest in whether you are of the orientation to offer something else.'

The thing about humour in teaching, Tom knew, was to pitch it at the right level. This varied greatly between classes, let alone Year groups. If you got it wrong, you were an embarrassment. If you crossed the border into rudeness, you haven't got a leg to stand on if they're rude back.

The retort was met with silence, and then about half a dozen of the sharper ones got it and started laughing and pointing at their classmate.

'He's calling you gay!' one girl cried, delighted at her teacher's audacious retort.

The smug grin disappeared completely, and for a second, the boy looked around, bewildered. Although he did not understand how his teacher had managed to turn the repartee around, the dauntless miscreant knew that it was he who was now the source of amusement and that a suitably impudent response was required.

'*You're gay,*' he growled, scowling aggressively at Mr. Langston.

There was a sharp communal intake of breath as the group turned to see their teacher's reaction. Tom knew at this point he'd made a mistake. Always know your class before taking risks. This situation could easily escalate irretrievably. He needed to save face without letting the troublemaker off the hook.

Stop Talking

‘I’m going to let you get away with that comment this once. If there’s another time it’ll be different.’

Tom had dropped his voice, but there was a prickly air of controlled anger as he spoke. ‘For the rest of this lesson you are going to follow instructions without hesitation and to the letter. If I have to speak to you again for the wrong reasons, you will regret it.’

The lad was injured by the joke and listened as Mr. Langston spoke, but he was not beaten. He shrugged to show indifference to the threat.

‘You can shrug now, but you will care on Monday when you lose your break,’ Mr. Langston warned.

‘I just won’t go.’

‘You will.’

‘I won’t.’

Despite the depths to which the lesson had degenerated in the space of a few moments, Tom could not help but smile at the banality of the interaction.

‘What is your name?’ he asked.

‘Me?’

‘Still talking to you, yes.’

‘Ben.’

‘Ben what?’

‘Ben Jones.’

The class tittered.

‘Ben, you’ve lost your break on Monday.’

‘All right, sir.’

Tom raised his eyebrows. Something was up.

A Lapse in Judgement

‘You come to this room at 11.05,’ he continued. ‘For every minute you’re late, you’ll do two in lunchtime.’

‘Fine.’ The pugnacious adolescent was smiling.

‘Sir, his name’s not Ben,’ a boy at the back called out with his hand in the air. Tom could never see why they did that. If you were going to call out anyway, why put your hand up? Tom was getting really annoyed now.

‘OK, what *is* his name?’

‘Dunno.’

‘Yes, you do.’

‘I don’t, honestly, sir.’

‘How do you know his name is not Ben Jones, then?’

The class was already laughing.

‘Because that’s my name.’

Again, the lesson was going perfectly for them. Comedy entertainment, no risk. This was not a class of pupils who cared if they were learning anything. Particularly not about music. Particularly not on a Friday afternoon. Tom decided to focus his attention on the root of the problem. He returned his gaze to the recalcitrant youngster and found that the irritating grin had come back, coupled with an unnervingly confident look in his eyes. In his experience, most kids looked away when you stared at them. This little pre-teen was holding his gaze unfalteringly.

‘What is your name?’

‘Dunno.’

‘Right, listen and believe it,’ Tom said venomously. ‘I am going to find out your name in the end. The longer it takes, the worse it will be for you. Unbelievably,’ Tom paused, surprised at the passion with which he

Stop Talking

spoke the word, 'this is still the beginning of the lesson. I've been here a week, taught nearly five hundred pupils, and I've had no situation like this. Certainly, no one has refused to give me their name.'

'I'm not refusing,' the boy sniggered, 'I've forgotten it.'

He was flying now. For an 8X4 pupil, he was witty, incredibly impertinent, and he had every member of the class behind him. Tom was running out of ideas. He knew he could send the boy out, but if you did you were supposed to report it to the head of department – HoD, and Tom did not want to tarnish his growing reputation for good discipline. In addition, Tom prided himself as a cool-headed risk-taker, someone who would certainly not duck a challenge from a rural Year 8 lad. He decided to commit himself.

'You have five seconds to tell me your name, or I'll send you out.'

The boy smirked as he sat, resolute.

'OK. Get out.'

'No.'

The flat refusal to obey the instruction came as a surprise to Tom, and by now, his blood was boiling. He didn't have to feign any kind of practised professional anger under these circumstances. He wanted to drag the tiresome imp out of his seat and throw him bodily out of the classroom. In the heat of the moment, he made another mistake.

'You can either leave by yourself,' Mr. Langston breathed dangerously, stepping the confrontation up a gear, 'or I'll help you.'

The class oohed. This was pantomime. Mr. Langston, whatever happened for the rest of the lesson, was doomed with this group now. An object of ridicule.

A Lapse in Judgement

‘You can’t make me,’ the boy replied, his eyes shining with challenge.

‘Yes, I can.’ Mr. Langston, taking part leave of his senses, strode toward the back of the room.

‘You can’t touch me!’ the boy shrieked, alarmed by his teacher’s aggressive advance. ‘I’ll report you!’

Mr. Langston grabbed him under the armpits and, using his considerable strength, hauled him toward the door. Tom knew the rule: a teacher can use ‘reasonable force’ to stabilise a situation. Unfortunately, what exactly amounted to reasonable force was not clear, and in all the year he’d been practising in London, no one had been able to tell him. Most answers were jovial. “No punching in the face, just to the body.” “I don’t know, I just lock them in the store cupboard until they shut up.” “Wrestling moves are OK – head locks, body slamming... that sort of thing.”

Tom had had to break up numerous fights during the course of his first year, and no one had ever questioned the way he’d handled them. As a result, he had grown confident of using his physical superiority to assert control and saw no issue with removing a pupil from the room by force.

‘Get off me!’ the struggling schoolboy yelled. ‘Fucking get off me, get off me, get off me...’

‘Keep talking.’ Mr. Langston was panting with exertion, despite his fitness. ‘I’m going to write this all down when you’re done.’

‘You fucking wanker!’

The rest of the class was in shock now. This surpassed a level of interaction they could enjoy and had transcended into the realms of uncertainty. They all knew their class tyrant was a dedicated lesson-

Stop Talking

disruptor. They had seen him wind teachers up before. Only that week, they had seen him make a female teacher cry by throwing bits of paper at her back when it was turned. But they had not seen him lose it. This time he had totally flipped his lid.

Mr. Langston strained as the boy hooked his appendages around table legs, kicked over chairs, grabbed door handles, and exerted every ounce of strength he had to stop himself from being removed. He did not, however, hit his teacher. The final boundary remained uncrossed.

By the time Mr. Langston finally managed to prise his hand from the handle of the door that lead outside, the lad was crying hysterically.

‘You can’t do that,’ he sobbed. ‘I hate you. I’m going to tell Miss Clarke. You’ll get fired.’

‘OK,’ Tom replied, unfazed. ‘Why don’t you go and tell her now?’

‘I will.’

He marched up the slope along a path that led toward the main building where most of the other classrooms were housed. Miss Clarke’s office was located at the front of the building, overlooking the car park.

Tom returned to the classroom to find the pupils wild with excitement.

‘Are you going to get the sack?’ a pupil at the front enquired.

‘I expect so, yep,’ Tom replied sarcastically, hanging his head forlornly.

‘Really?’ The same pupil turned round to face the rest of the class. ‘Sir’s going to get the sack and he’s only been here a week!’

‘No, I’m *not* going to get the sack,’ Tom corrected emphatically. ‘Look. I don’t know anything about that boy, including his name, but I am sure it’s not the first time he’s behaved in that way.’

A Lapse in Judgement

‘I’ve never seen him go mental like that before, sir!’ a rather bedraggled little girl exclaimed, wide-eyed.

‘Well I’m sure he’s always had it in him. Anyway, let’s start again.’

The lesson never recovered from that episode. The pupils were unsettled and far too keen to talk about what had happened. Mr. Langston managed to get the delivery of the task across without interruption, and the majority largely understood it, but there was no proper engagement with the activity. Pupils separated into their designated groups but could not cope with the task. Their social skills, particularly under the circumstances, were far too inadequate to cope with unsupervised group work, and the bubbling chatter was monothematic. After visiting each group to offer help, Tom quickly realised his efforts were futile, and he looked at his watch: three o’ clock. Twenty-five minutes to go. He could either let the lesson go on as it was or pull it around and try a different tack. Tired from the first week and jaded by the incident, Tom, with a twinge of conscience, decided to ride it until 3.25. This was to be another mistake.

‘Mr. Langston?’ called a trenchant voice over the commotion.

Tom turned to face the Head. She was standing in the tiny reception area of his hut, which made up the second half of the music block, and peering into the teaching room with an overtly contrived look of alarm on her face.

‘Hi,’ he responded lightly, as if she’d come round for tea.

‘Can I have a word?’ she asked stiffly.

‘Of course.’

Stop Talking

Tom's heart was in his mouth. He really didn't feel he'd done much wrong, but he knew there was going to be trouble. Stepping awkwardly past the androgynous bulk of his boss, he opened the door to the steps that led up to the classroom. She followed, her face tight with disapproval.

Tom smiled broadly. 'Yes?'

'I have Shaun Bratcher in my room – very upset – telling me you assaulted him.'

Tom showed mock surprise. 'I assume Shaun Bratcher is short and has a bowl haircut?'

Miss Clarke frowned and ignored the comment. 'Shaun tells me you dragged him out of the classroom for no reason.'

'He was refusing to give me his name.'

Miss Clarke's face coloured. 'So you dragged him out of the room?'

'Yes.'

'I would like to see you in my room at 3.30,' she said ominously. 'Is your lesson going all right?' she asked, casting an eye over his shoulder, knowing full well it wasn't.

'I've known better.'

'I don't think unsupervised group work is the best approach with 8X4, Mr. Langston,' she advised as she descended the steps. 'Perhaps you'd like to consider an alternative strategy.'

Miss Clarke stalked up the path. She clearly had issues with Tom's teaching, as well as the way he'd handled Shaun Bratcher, literally and metaphorically.

A Lapse in Judgement

Inside, the awestruck faces of 8X4 were pressed against the windows. Mr. Langston walked back into the classroom.

‘Sir’s going to get the sack,’ someone cried. ‘Are you going to get the sack, sir?’

Tom felt sick. He felt the unique torment that separates teaching from almost all other professions: thirty people, whom you’ve just met, taking pleasure from your distress.

‘No. Now all of you sit down and be quiet. This is probably the worst lesson I’ve ever had the misfortune to teach. There’s no way, no way at all, this is going to happen again. I don’t care if I have to teach the same lesson every lunchtime for a week. You will learn what I have to teach you, and you will all come back to this room on Monday at 12.15.’

‘We can’t come then, sir,’ the wide-eyed girl said.

‘Why not?’

‘Lunch is at 12.20.’

Mr. Langston could see that the girl was not being deliberately antagonistic, but there was more tittering from the rest of the class.

‘12.20 then,’ he revised limply.

A lad, who had been leaning back on his chair since the start, stuck his hand in the air.

‘Yes?’ Mr. Langston asked, exasperation spiking his voice.

‘I can’t come.’

‘Why not?’

‘Got football.’

‘Not anymore, you haven’t.’ Mr. Langston glared at him, but he was losing the will to fight. ‘And stop leaning back in your chair.’

‘No way, mate,’ the boy replied, enjoying the audience.

Stop Talking

‘Stop leaning back in your chair!’ Mr. Langston shouted.

‘All right, calm down, mate!’ The boy eased his chair back onto four legs and smirked at his friends. ‘I’m going to football, though.’

‘You’re not, and don’t call me mate.’

‘I am.’

‘I will speak to whoever takes football and tell him that you will not be there on Monday.’

‘No way, mate.’

‘I’m not your mate.’

The boy muttered something under his breath.

‘What did you say?’ Mr. Langston asked.

‘Nothing.’

‘Yes, you did. If you’ve got something to say, say it.’

‘I didn’t say nothing.’

‘Yes, you did. What’s your name?’

The boy paused, then grinned.

‘Ben Jones.’

As the last pupil filed out of the classroom at the end of the lesson, Tom’s shoulders slumped and he exhaled slowly. He felt utterly demoralised, despondent and, to an extent, persecuted. He knew not to take it personally, but it was hard, particularly being new. One of them had said they had never seen Shaun act like that before, and now he had to face whatever the Head had to offer. He had heard that she had a tendency to side with pupils in these scenarios, but he hadn’t done anything seriously wrong, had he?



A Lapse in Judgement

The Head at Brentmouth was not a popular figure. She had been at the school just two years and in that time had not only made enemies of several of the longest-serving members of staff but also presided over a slide in results and behaviour. When she took up the position, she had made her educational principles very clear. She was a fierce advocate of ‘putting children first’. These words subsequently became the school motto and their effect slowly filtered through the system. Staff felt increasingly unsupported and vulnerable. The first of a series of incidents in which Hilary Clarke showed how vehemently she believed in this credo took place six weeks after the appointment of an NQT. The probationer had shouted down a pupil who tried to talk whilst being reprimanded. Miss Clarke got to hear of it and told the young drama teacher that shouting was not permitted in the classroom, and that she should apologise. The bemused thirteen-year-old, who had been worrying about what was going to happen, couldn’t believe the turn around and stood there during the apology, slack-jawed. Within a day, everybody, from the most naïve Year 7 pupil to the most uninterested parent, got to hear about it. It was just the beginning.

•

Tom took a deep breath and knocked.

‘Come in,’ came the muffled but distinctive voice of the Head from behind the door. ‘Mr. Langston,’ she greeted brusquely, as he stepped in.

‘Hello.’

Stop Talking

‘Shaun tells me that you pushed him as you tried to remove him from the music block. He has a cut on his elbow where he fell against the door. Would you like to tell me your version of events?’

In an attempt to give an air of supreme confidence in his guiltlessness, Tom imprudently took a seat without waiting for an invitation and made himself comfortable. He stretched a fatherly arm across Hilary’s comfiest chair and crossed his legs casually.

‘He entered the classroom, pushing the boy in front as he did so,’ he began, gazing around the office with disconcerting interest. ‘He then ran around the room shouting, “Somebody stop me!” in an impression of Jim Carey in *The Mask*. I asked him to sit down and he completely ignored me. I asked him again and he baaed like a sheep. Then I shouted at him to sit down, which he did as slowly as possible. He then proceeded to be rude and difficult, and he called me gay. I told him he had lost his break on Monday. He said he wouldn’t go. I asked him for his name. He gave me someone else’s. I told him to go out. He refused. I then picked him up and carried him out. He struggled a lot and, in doing so, must have hurt himself.’

‘He says you called *him* gay.’

‘No, I was trying to make a joke.’

‘Yes?’

‘I asked him for his name by saying, “Give it to me”. He responded by saying, “Give *what* to you, sir?” so I said, “Your name. I have no interest in whether you are of the orientation to offer something else”. I thought it might be funny. I regret it now.’

‘I expect you do.’

Hilary paused as she considered how best to proceed.

A Lapse in Judgement

‘Nothing’s going to happen until next week,’ she concluded, seeming somewhat mollified. ‘Shaun’s parents are likely to make a complaint. If they do, you need to contact your union immediately. I am going to ask the other pupils in the class what their version of events is before I decide how I’m going to handle the situation. You go now and enjoy the weekend. I’ll speak to you again on Monday.’

Casualty of Teenage Obsession

There was a searing blaze, a fizzing clap, and the homemade firework ripped through Roy's hand, blowing his fingers all over his face. The device had been assembled by a group of young army fanatics with a rudimentary knowledge of explosives, and it had simply blown up as Roy was lighting it.

They had made a hole in the roof of the hut for fireworks to shoot through. It was a great little structure. The roof was built from evergreen branches ripped from nearby conifers, and the planks that supported it had been pilfered from a neighbour's skip. It stood at the end of the garden. No one had any concerns about intrusions, as Roy's parents were no longer together. His father, an incurable philanderer, was perpetually pissed and rarely visited while his mother, who also drank heavily, spent most evenings moaning about how shit her life was to other washouts down the local pub.

No one heard the scream as the incandescent incinerating parts spat and whizzed capriciously about the makeshift hut, sparking on clothing and setting bits of scattered straw alight. The twenty or so

Casualty of Teenage Obsession

teenagers previously huddled together in the confined gloomy space panicked, and pandemonium broke out as they scrambled for the exit. Amidst the blinding white cracks and lightning rockets, a girl tripped over the table used to support the firework and sprawled into a corner of the hut where a magazine had caught fire. Suddenly, her long black hair was ablaze as sizzling little flames raced up the matted strands toward her horrified face. Raucous shrieks added to screaming, and the resultant cacophony heightened the panic. A boy, also with sweeps of long black hair, lurched forward and, for want of a better extinguishing implement, started beating her around the head with handfuls of straw. Instinctively, the girl fought back and the two of them rolled around in the wet, trampled grass and empty beer cans, yelling at the other to stop. A candle being used to brighten the chamber, lit otherwise by nothing more than the red glow of an evening summer's sun, was knocked off the table into a boy's lap. The flame went out, but hot wax poured onto the lad's arm causing a reflex that knocked the table over. More people stumbled and fell as they crashed into the upturned legs, and a pile of squirming bodies built up next to the doorway. Muffled cries of pain broke through the wriggling jumble as legs and arms were crushed and twisted.

The unpleasant odour of burning hair filtered through the fresh smell of spent dynamite as the girl with her head on fire eventually succumbed to the frenzied straw-beating and allowed the flames to be quenched. The last mini-rocket spat out its last breath and expired in an ephemeral flash. Bodies slowly rolled away from the pile and an eerie quiet followed. Wisps of lurid smoke hung in the air as people gathered their senses and surveyed the aftermath of the explosion. All now seemed

Stop Talking

peaceful inside the wooden walls of the hut and sounds of hushed voices furthered the ambience of calm.

An agonised moan came from a solitary figure in the middle of the hut. Roy was still sitting in the same spot where he'd lit the firework, but he was hunched over in his chair holding his right forearm. Everyone turned, but in the smoky half-light it was difficult to see what was wrong. Then, one of Roy's friends found a pocket torch and shone it in the direction of the disturbing sound.

Where there should have been a right hand there was a palm, a row of mutilated stumps, and a twitching thumb. Each stump was pumping blood that poured down his arm in a network of dark rivulets. Roy's mates stood and stared as the shock of what had happened froze them into statues. The blood and the moaning continued and no one moved an inch. Suddenly, a boy freed himself from the hypnotic grip of the horrific image.

'Fucking call an ambulance!' he shouted.

No one reacted.

'Call a fucking ambulance for fuck's sake!'

Roy screamed as a fresh wave of pain coursed through his arm. His dumbstruck mates continued to look on, unmoving.

'Fucking hell! Call a fucking ambulance! Fuck!!' blurted Roy, his contorted face looking demonic in the torchlight.

Still the hut was static.

'Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, fuck me...' Roy was whimpering in such a pitiful way it was embarrassing, despite the cause.

'Roy, you're OK, mate, you're OK.' Roy's best friend, Dan, stepped over to him and placed his hand nervously on Roy's shoulder as if he thought that might hurt as well.

Casualty of Teenage Obsession

‘Fucking not!’

‘No, it’s OK,’ Dan argued, clearly ready to debate the point. ‘Listen, we’re calling an ambulance.’ He nodded violently at someone to make the call. ‘It’ll be here soon, OK? It’ll be here soon.’

Roy stopped moaning, screaming and saying fuck. He had passed into shock and was beginning to be numb to the pain, though his face was ashen, and his torn hand was still twitching. Dan had heard of faces going chalk-white before in books, but he’d never seen it happen in real life.

‘Please help me, man! Please help me, please help me!’ Roy had lost his pride and was blathering uncontrollably.

Dan looked around in desperation, but no one met his eyes.

‘Please...’ Roy’s voice was a strip.

‘Roy, you’re gonna be OK, you’re gonna be OK. Um...’ Dan suddenly had a brainwave. ‘Find the fingers!’ He looked around for approval. Most of those who had remained in the hut looked at Dan in horror except for a lad named Wesley, who came to life and sprung into action on his hands and knees. This was apparently his kind of job. As the silent crowd pulled itself out of rigor mortis, the remainder of Roy’s combat-clad friends joined in the search. The rest made a quiet exit.

‘We’re gonna find the fingers, mate,’ Dan reassured, ‘and they’ll sew them back on at the hospital.’

Roy didn’t respond.

‘Yeah,’ Wesley agreed. ‘Let’s hope they know which one goes where.’

The company still present stared at Wesley, aghast, their eyes wide and ghostly in the torchlight. Wes bowed his head and continued to poke about in the flattened grass.

Stop Talking

From behind the hill, a siren cut the night sky, and the sound startled some into grabbing their jackets, and as much drink as they could carry, and legging it. Two of Roy's more loyal friends, Binden and Lois, jogged down to the road to meet the ambulance.

A police car followed the wailing ambulance as it pulled up outside. Two paramedics jumped out and walked briskly up the steps to the front porch, while behind them, a policeman and policewoman exited their vehicle less urgently.

Binden and Lois led the group through the house and across the unkempt lawn toward the hut. They found it deserted except for Roy, Dan, Wes and the longhaired girl and boy named Mel and Jake. Everyone else had decided it was not worth the risk getting caught drinking underage, even if that meant abandoning some of the alcohol they had brought.

The paramedics, with Dan for moral support, led Roy to the ambulance while the cops stopped to ask some questions regarding the origin of the firework. Not unused to trouble with the law, the remaining ensemble either responded with vague answers or claimed ignorance.

Inside the ambulance, a paramedic examined the mangled remains of one of the fingers given to him by a boy who had proudly introduced himself as Wes. He plopped it into a bag knowing there was little hope that it could be successfully grafted back on. His partner slammed the rear doors shut, leapt into the driver's seat, and sped to the hospital.

Meeting with the Bratchers

Monday morning dawned bright and noisy with the squawking of dozens of circling seagulls. Tom's flat was located at the top of a hill about a mile from the sea, and the sea birds there grew to gigantic proportions.

The first thing he thought of when he awoke was Shaun Bratcher. His contorted Jim Carey face sprung into Tom's mind the instant Classic FM woke him up with a string of adverts. He showered and dressed quickly before setting out on the half-mile walk to school with a banana-flavoured milkshake for sustenance.

Tom reached the perimeter of the school grounds and took the shortcut through the woods to the huts that were erected for temporary use in the 1960s. The route had been shown to him by his HoD as a way of avoiding the stream of pupils and cars that congested the main entrance each day.

He turned the key to his hut, and the click had a hollow ring as the sound reverberated around the bare walls. Tom put his case by the desk,

Stop Talking

prepared his resources, and made his way up to the staffroom, which was down the corridor from Hilary's office.

After briefing, Hilary pulled Tom aside and asked him to come to her room at break, causing him to sweat through the whole of the first and second lessons as he awaited the Bratcher family's response.

At the bell, Tom dismissed his class and strode up the slope to the main building. Upon arrival, the Head's PA beckoned him to a seat and phoned through to Hilary's office. He waited. Through the door he could faintly hear the sound of Hilary's voice, but although he picked out the name Bratcher more than once, Tom could not tell what was said. Eventually, he was summoned.

'Take a seat, Tom,' Hilary instructed facetiously, extravagantly sweeping an arm in the direction of the comfy chair. Tom caught the drift but did not acknowledge it. Instead, he sat down and folded his arms combatively.

'Shaun Bratcher's parents have been on the phone to me this morning,' she continued, temper flickering at the snub. 'They are coming in to see me after school today. I have spoken to several members of Shaun's class. They say they saw you push him against the door.'

'I did not.'

Hilary snorted. 'Are you telling me they are *all* lying?!'

'They are either lying or mistaken. I did not push that boy – I simply carried him out of the room.'

'What union are you in?' she asked ominously.

'NUT.'

Miss Clarke sighed and rolled her eyes. 'Mr. Hingley is the rep for the NUT. I strongly advise you to speak to him today and let him know

what is happening.’ She paused. ‘Mr. Langston, don’t try to brush this under the carpet.’

Tom bit his lip thoughtfully as he left Hilary’s office. Why would the kids say he pushed Shaun Bratcher? Did it look like pushing as he carried him through the doorway? Maybe they had been asked the wrong question, like, ‘How did Mr. Langston remove Shaun from the classroom?’ One kid may have started off by using the word ‘push’ and got them all doing it. They weren’t the brightest minds in Year 8 after all. They wouldn’t have realised the crucial differences between ‘push’, ‘carry’, ‘shove’, ‘move’, ‘throw’, ‘manhandle’, and the implications for Mr. Langston of using the wrong one. For some of them, ‘manhandle’ would have got them picturing a big, man-shaped handle, Tom smiled ruefully. He wondered whether Hilary had bothered to question them separately or not.

Tom made his way down the stairs to the upper north corridor and across the quad, which was a grassy area about big enough for the game of choice in Years 7 to 9 at the time – British Bulldog. He was almost at the south corridor when he heard a shout behind him.

‘Oi, sir! Did you beat up Bratcher?!’

Tom turned and saw a large, gormless-looking boy with a huge grass stain across the front of his shirt standing next to Shaun. To dignify the question with a response, especially one that would have to be shouted across the quad to be heard, would be a fairly elementary mistake. Yet somehow, to say nothing seemed either like he couldn’t handle the question or, worse still, an admission of guilt. Tom chose the hard way. He stopped and walked back across the grass toward the pair.

Stop Talking

The game stopped as Mr. Langston approached, and a crowd of pupils started to gather.

Tom looked at the gormless boy, reminded of Pug from *The Beano*. 'If there's something you want to discuss,' he began, 'we will discuss it in my classroom, not out here in front of all your mates, and certainly not by shouting across the quad.'

'Did you beat him up though?' the lad repeated.

'Of course not!' Tom snorted. 'Does he look beaten up to you?'

Mr. Langston had done well to leave Shaun out of it thus far. He should have kept it that way.

'No.' The boy was stumped momentarily. 'Yeah, but Shaun's a bit gay, sir. You only have to touch him and he starts crying!'

The ever-increasing crowd started laughing and jeering at Shaun, who once again found himself the butt of everyone's fun. He needed to retaliate and this time the recipient was not Mr. Langston. A tall, gangly Year 7 lad, who had strayed from the relative safety of his tutor room to see what the commotion was about, suddenly found himself laughing in the enraged face of the widely despised and avoided bully. Shaun was shorter than the bespectacled Year 7, but he was a nasty piece of work and could tell this smartly dressed boy with a middle-aged side parting would offer no resistance.

'What are you fucking laughing at?' Shaun snarled, squaring up on tiptoe until their heads butted. 'Yeah? Come on then!'

Shaun shoved the tall lad hard in the chest, and he would have fallen had not another pupil caught him and shoved him back for more. The crowd had doubled in size and some of the rough members of Years 10 and 11 were amongst it. They were cajoling Shaun into hitting the Year

7, and now the group had lost interest in Mr. Langston and encircled the pair.

Tom was well used to this environment but did not want to start hauling Shaun about, with things as they were. He pushed his way forcefully through the crowd toward the centre. Pale with fear, the thin Year 7 tried to back away from his stunted attacker, but a couple of big, grinning lads, who barely passed for Brentmouth pupils in their jeans and trainers, blocked his path. Kids could be such arseholes, Tom thought, as he broke through. He never felt guilty about wanting to teach these sorts of pupils a completely different kind of lesson. He strode over. Normally he would have grabbed the antagonist – there's always one who wants it more than the other – but on this occasion he stood between them and faced the Year 7.

‘OK, you’re fine. Let’s go,’ he said, turning the boy around and motioning for the two older lads to move out of the way. They stood their ground, testing the new teacher.

‘Get out of the way! Now!’ Tom bellowed, sticking his face just inches from theirs. The two lads backed off slightly, but as Tom stepped forward, a foot tripped him from behind. Knowing it was Shaun, Tom whirled and glared down at the grinning little reprobate as if he wanted to kill him. When you’re as angry as that, there is nothing in the world as irritating as a grinning face. He felt he could really do this boy some damage. He would love to wipe that smile so far from his face he would never regain it.

‘Do that again. Go on – do that again,’ Tom breathed, his dark, aquiline eyes shining as he struggled against the fury that threatened to overwhelm him. ‘I want you to do that again... or you too scared now?’

Stop Talking

Shaun could see the violence in Mr. Langston's eyes, and suddenly, he was afraid. He had never seen a look like that in the eyes of a teacher before. In fact, the only person he'd ever seen with a look like that was his father. But Tom was not done.

'Too scared now, are you?' Mr. Langston towered over Shaun, every muscle quivering with rage. 'What's the matter? You too scared?'

Then, fortunately for them both, the anger began to subside. Mr. Langston's eyes continued to burn into Shaun's for a few tense moments, but then he turned abruptly and put an arm around the shoulder of the Year 7. As he made his way through the crowd, he brushed against one of the older boys who seemed reluctant to get out of the way. The boy reacted as if stung and leapt backward, holding his arms out stiffly like a body-builder.

'No way, man!' protested the streetwise chav. 'You better not touch me, man!'

The lad stared aggressively at Mr. Langston before turning away and cursing him under his breath. Tom didn't hear what was said but decided he'd had enough trouble for one day and ignored it. He leant down to the boy he was escorting.

'Who's your tutor?'

'Miss Paterson,' the boy choked. He was fighting back tears.

'OK. We'll go to the staffroom and tell her what happened. She will look after you – don't worry. If that baboon-faced halfwit goes anywhere near you again, you tell her or go to the Head, OK?'

The boy chuckled dutifully and nodded.

Tom left him with Miss Paterson and, despite everything, had a reasonable day. Most of 8X4 turned up soon after 12.20, and he went

through the main points of the lesson again without hitch. As expected, the few who had caused most of the trouble weren't there, and Mr. Langston wrote down their names. He would catch up with them later.

Tom had lunch with two other newly qualified guys he had met the previous week. He told them what had happened on Friday and earlier that day. They both reassured Tom that he would be fine, but they recognised it was a case of the pupils' word against his and were uncertain what constituted proof. They too had heard about the Head's bias toward the children in such circumstances but had also been told that Neil Hingley was a good union rep. Apparently, he was well known for standing up to the Head when she bullied teachers she'd ear-marked as black sheep.

The final bell rang and the excitable but malleable set of Year 7s left with regimental order from Mr. Langston's room. What the hell happened to pupils at this place such that in the space of a year they could become so hostile and wantonly rebellious, Tom wondered. He knew that being a newcomer made a big difference, but other members of staff had commented that the degeneration of behaviour between Years 7 and 8 was deeply concerning. As he cleared his things, Julian Hart – Tom's HoD – came in and sat on a desk.

'You OK?' he asked.

'Yeah. Any tips?'

'Tell the truth. We both know you didn't do anything wrong, so don't let her push you around. I'll support you in any way I can.'

'Cheers.' Tom picked up the last errant chair and placed it on a table ready for the cleaners. 'Will you still be here when I'm done?'

'Yes, of course.'

Stop Talking

Tom arrived at Hilary's office to find Shaun's parents sitting in the corridor. Shaun, who was sitting in between and looking sorry for himself, glanced up at Mr. Langston and looked away. Gone was the insolent air he had exuded in previous encounters.

Rather than introduce himself to Shaun's parents in this uncomfortable environment, Tom carried on past to the staffroom. He realised that Hilary would have known they had arrived and there was a strong possibility of his bumping into them, perhaps literally, if she left them outside. Professionally and personally, Tom was beginning to develop a real dislike of this woman.

He made some coffee and tried to avoid engaging in conversation with the other teachers as they gathered their exercise books ready for marking at home. Most of them probably knew about the incident with Shaun, but Tom had no desire to discuss it.

He peered studiously at an arbitrary section of the notice board to give the impression he should not be disturbed and thought back to his time in the capital. As a student, Tom had not felt the entrapment that so grounded the spirits of permanent members of staff, and this had given him a sense of perspective and a very welcome feeling of detachment during the tough days. Nevertheless, he'd been shaken more than he had ever admitted when a lad had gone berserk and thrown a chair at him. With a slight shake of the head, he remembered a supply teacher leaving the first day he was hired because some hooligan threw a brick at his head from the school roof. On one occasion, on a frosty February morning, he had entered the canteen to find two lads beating the living daylights out of each other. A female member of staff was caught in between, futilely trying to separate the pair and desperately screaming for them to stop

while getting caught in the crossfire. Perhaps the worst incident Tom could remember was one in which a teacher had so hopelessly lost control of a class that they had started fighting each other and breaking windows. Tom happened to be patrolling the corridors with the deputy head when they found the defeated teacher sitting with his head in his hands as the chaos around him raged unabated. The teacher saw them, broke down, and ran out and vomited in the toilets. At the time, Tom honestly thought nothing would ever compare with that. He still thought nothing would ever compare with that, but he had to admit, after one week in a comparatively rural community on the south coast, he was already experiencing worrying problems. The main difference, he reflected, was that in London he felt supported. Here he felt victimised.

Tom walked down the corridor back to the Head's office and saw that the miserable trio had gone inside. He checked his stride a little and composed himself. Tom was generally pretty good at dealing with confrontation because he constantly told himself that he simply didn't care very much what people thought of him. On this occasion, however, his job was in jeopardy. He knocked twice robustly to indicate his self-confidence and lack of concern.

'Come in!' the Head's voice rang out from the other side of the door.

Shaun's parents were sitting across from Miss Clarke, who was on the phone ordering coffees from her PA as Tom walked in. He felt it inappropriate to shake hands, although the comedy in doing so did not escape him. Judiciously exercising a scintilla of propriety, he waited to be told where to sit, glancing disdainfully at the parents. The mother was a mess. Her long, lank hair was scraped back across her head to a limp

Stop Talking

ponytail that gleamed dully with grease. Her eyes were dark and deep-set and might have looked malevolent if they were not so vacant. Both haggard specimens wore dated, stonewashed denim jeans and jackets with grime embedded deep in the material. The bloke, who was staring at the ground wishing he were somewhere else, was not Shaun's father. (Tom had bothered to dig out the family's records earlier in the day.) He had a phoenix tattoo on his neck, which had faded so badly that it now looked as if a toddler had scribbled on his neck with a red biro, silver earrings, and a flourishing monobrow. In Brentmouth, the indigenous working-class inhabitants often decorated themselves with colourful epidermal designs wherever their body hair would allow and, in Tom's slightly judgemental eyes, all appeared a bit degenerate.

Miss Clarke came off the phone.

'Mr. Langston, this is Mrs.. Bratcher and Mr. Smith,' she stated, pointing at each in turn to help him identify who was who.

'Hi!' said Tom cheerfully, giving them a warm smile. Neither responded except by eyeing him as if he had just come in from slaughtering puppies. Tom rubbed an internal pair of hands with relish. This was going to be interesting.

'Sit down, Mr. Langston,' Miss Clarke commanded, no derisory needle this time as she pulled out a seat opposite the mother.

'Perhaps it would be best if you go first, Mrs.. Bratcher,' Hilary continued, 'and then Mr. Langston can address any allegations you may have against him.'

Mrs.. Bratcher looked confused. The vocabulary was clearly already an obstacle for her.

Meeting with the Bratchers

‘He beat up my son, didn’t he?’ she gabbled in her provincial accent. ‘Shaun come home an’ he’s got cuts and everything on his arm, right? I fought he’d been messing about with his mates an’ that, but he’s gone to me it were his teacher. He can’t do that, can he?’ she exclaimed, gesturing toward Tom. ‘I mean, I give him a slap when he don’t do what he’s told, but I’m his mother, ain’t I?’

Mouth ajar, Mrs.. Bratcher looked around aghast as if looking for confirmation of her biological status. Her voice had the rasping tone of a heavy smoker, her teeth resembled Stonehenge, and the breath engulfing Tom was threatening to induce retching. It was so thick and potent that Tom thought he could see it floating toward him. He held his breath and waited for Hilary to respond.

‘Would you like to give your version of events now, Mr. Langston?’ the Head invited.

“Version of events” again, Tom thought. Not exactly an unwavering pillar of trust and support. Still, he didn’t need it.

‘As Shaun entered the classroom,’ Tom choked, as his lungs screamed for oxygen, ‘he was clearly not ready to learn anything. He was shouting at pupils in the line opposite, and he pushed the boy in front on his way in.’

Tom sucked in a deep breath and nearly died.

‘I never,’ Shaun interjected, slouching in his chair in an attempt to be less conspicuous.

‘Let Mr. Langston finish please, Shaun, and then you can have your say,’ Miss Clarke soothed. It was then that Tom noticed Shaun was holding a biscuit, which he nibbled like a malnourished rodent.

Stop Talking

‘He then ran around the room shouting, “Somebody stop me!” which I presume is a result of watching the film, *The Mask*, or something,’ Tom went on. ‘I asked him to sit down, but he seemed not to hear as he failed to acknowledge the instruction. I asked him again, and he did an impression of a sheep, again, very accurately.’

Tom was being provocative on purpose and Shaun sniggered. Perfect, Tom thought, as the mother shot her son a withering glance.

‘Then I asked him to sit down, which he did as slowly as possible. After that, he refused to follow any of the instructions given, and he called me gay.’

‘No I never!’ Shaun blurted out. ‘He called me gay first!’

‘Shaun...’ the Head warned with the reproachful tone of an affectionate nanny.

‘I gave him a detention for break time today, which he missed. I asked him for his name and he said “Ben Jones”. I sent him out and he refused to go. I decided the lesson was unteachable with him in the room, so for the sake of the education of every other pupil in the class, I removed him by force. I did not, at any point, push him against anything.’

‘You did,’ Shaun interrupted again.

Tom sighed. ‘No, Shaun, I did not.’

‘It was him who started it by calling me gay,’ Shaun persisted, jabbing a grubby finger in his teacher’s direction.

‘I merely implied that you *might* be as part of a joke that you didn’t even understand.’

‘That’s the same thing though, ain’t it?’ the mother chimed in, steering her son’s finger back to the biscuit. ‘That ain’t right, that ain’t.’

Meeting with the Bratchers

‘Being gay isn’t right? You ought to be more broad-minded, Mrs.. Bratcher.’ Tom felt too superior to these total plebs to engage in a sensible conversation with them. Hilary flashed him a warning look.

‘No, that’s not what I meant,’ said Mrs.. Bratcher. ‘You can’t go round calling kids gay!’

‘I try not to make a habit of it.’

‘Let’s concentrate on the issue at hand here, shall we?’ the Head interrupted swiftly.

‘OK, if Shaun hurt himself while I was carrying him out he must have done it through thrashing and flailing about,’ Tom said emphatically.

‘I didn’t – you pushed me! Everybody saw you!’ Shaun played his trump card.

‘They ain’t gonna lie, are they?’ Mrs.. Bratcher asked rhetorically, turning to Miss Clarke.

Hilary considered her position. She knew she should be defending her employee, but she didn’t like his arrogance and flippancy. She thought that Mr. Langston *had* pushed Shaun, but had not meant to push him into the door. This sort of incident was unfortunate so early in the job, but it certainly was not uncommon in a rough school like Brentmouth, particularly among young male teachers. And secretly, she still thought that despite the disorder she had witnessed last Friday, this man had potential. She also recognised, though she was not about to share the information with Mr. Langston, that 8X4 was a very difficult group with some of the most maladjusted members in Year 8. To have them for the first time last thing on a Friday was bound to be disastrous. Still, she reflected, it was up to Mr. Hart to anticipate those situations, not her. She decided to cut to the chase.

Stop Talking

‘Are you going to press charges?’ the Head asked finally.

‘Eh?’ Mrs.. Bratcher looked at her uncertainly.

Tom glanced at the boyfriend, but he appeared to have passed out in his chair.

‘We can either deal with this internally, which means I will deal with Mr. Langston myself, or you can report this to the police and take the matter to court.’

Mr. Smith sat up at the mention of the police. He clearly didn’t like the sound of going to them for assistance.

‘Let ‘er sort ‘im out,’ he said, beckoning toward Miss Clarke and clearing his throat as if these were the first words uttered in a long time.

Mrs.. Bratcher scowled at her boyfriend disapprovingly. In their relationship, it was apparently not for him to proffer an opinion.

‘What are you going to do then if you do the charges?’ she asked, still wearing the scowl.

‘I don’t press the charges,’ Miss Clarke explained. ‘That’s what you do, if you decide to take this to court.’

Tom decided to have some fun.

‘What about my charges?’ he asked, pretending to be confused. The Head glanced at him questioningly. What was this new upstart talking about?

‘If I decide that I want to have some charges,’ Tom continued slowly, ‘who gets them?’ He frowned as if his brain were being overloaded.

‘Er... what do you...’ Hilary began.

‘And where?’ Tom finished.

Meeting with the Bratchers

‘I don’t understand what you mean,’ said Miss Clarke with irritation, wondering whether she was the only sane one in the room. Maybe she’d given this new bloke too much credit after all. ‘You haven’t got any charges against anyone. You may have charges placed against you if this matter is taken to court. That is up to Mrs.. Bratcher, not you.’

Everyone in the room gawped at Mr. Langston who, privately, was thoroughly enjoying himself.

‘OK.’ Tom screwed his face up like a toddler. ‘What are my charges?’

‘That you assaulted Shaun Bratcher,’ Miss Clarke replied in exasperation.

‘Those are *my* charges?’

‘Yes!’

‘So what are Mrs. Bratcher’s charges?’

‘She hasn’t got any!’

‘Mrs. Bratcher hasn’t got any charges?’

‘No!’

‘Well I’m all right then.’

‘Excuse me?’ Hilary’s complexion was darkening.

‘If Mrs. Bratcher hasn’t got any charges against me, I’m all right.’

‘No, she has got charges against you, those are your charges.’

‘*Oh!*’ Tom said theatrically, as though finally comprehending. ‘So we’ve *both* got charges.’

Mrs. Bratcher, Mr. Smith and Shaun looked on in total bewilderment. Mr. Smith was getting concerned that he might walk out of the office in handcuffs. Mrs. Bratcher was desperately trying to cling on to the reason that she was there. Shaun didn’t know what charges were but

Stop Talking

wondered if you could eat them. He decided to return to more important issues.

‘Can I have another biscuit please?’ he asked politely.

Miss Clarke switched her gaze to Shaun and tried to focus.

‘Er... yes, of course.’ She handed Shaun the rest of the packet and his eyes lit up. Mr. Langston could be bludgeoned to death in the playground or awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for all he cared now.

‘I don’t mean to be obtuse, but I need to be sure I understand exactly what is going on,’ said Mr. Langston, as if each word were consuming a skull-load of concentration. ‘If there are any charges, whose are they, to whom do they belong, and from whom are they going to come?’

‘Mrs. Bratcher, Mrs. Bratcher, Mrs. Bratcher!’ the Head shouted in real annoyance.

‘What?’ Mrs. Bratcher asked anxiously.

‘So, it all comes down to Mrs. Bratcher,’ Tom said portentously, as though incriminating her in a murder inquiry.

‘Yes!’ the Head replied, confirming Mrs. Bratcher’s fears. ‘Mrs. Bratcher, are you going to press charges?’

Mrs. Bratcher’s tiny anguished mind was so confused she just wanted an end to it all.

‘No, I don’t think that’s a good idea. Is it? I mean, if it’s all sorted out it’s OK, so that’s it. Shaun, stop eating all those biscuits. Look at him, greedy little so-and-so. You’ve got stuff all round your face an’ all. Come here.’ Mrs. Bratcher dabbed at Shaun’s face with her sleeve. ‘Give them back to Miss Clarke, Shaun. Shaun! You heard, give them back before I gives you a slap – I mean it!’

Meeting with the Bratchers

Shaun scrunched the packet up and plopped them back grudgingly on the desk just as the Head's PA came in with a tray of coffees and a can of Coke. The Head stood quickly and moved to intercept her.

'Thank you, Mrs. Stanley, but we won't be needing those. We're just about finished.'

'I could just do with a can of Coke as well,' said Tom forlornly.

'That was for me!' Shaun objected.

'Really? You look like a coffee man to me.'

'Na, I like Coke much better. Coffee's disgusting. I drank some once and I nearly puked, didn't I, Mum?'

'You did. He drinks just about everything else though,' advised Mrs. Bratcher, addressing Tom and jovial all of a sudden. 'He even drinks beer when Nige gives it 'im. You likes your beer, don't ya? You little alcoholic!' Mrs. Bratcher ruffled Shaun's bowl affectionately.

'Well, that must be why he's such a big, strong boy,' Tom said, no hint of a smile. This was getting quite friendly.

'I know – takes after his father,' said Mrs. Bratcher proudly.

'Anyway...' the Head stepped in before Mrs. Bratcher started arranging a social, 'thank you both for coming in. I'm glad we managed to sort everything out so amicably.'

'That's all right. We don't want no trouble. Come on, Nige, you lazy bastard – excuse me French!' Mrs. Bratcher cackled. Tom shuddered as a poisonous fetid cloud buffeted him in the face.

They shuffled out of the door and Tom followed hastily, longing for fresh air.

'Mr. Langston,' the Head called. Tom stopped and turned.

'Yes?'

Stop Talking

Miss Clarke hesitated.

‘Nothing.’ She shook her head. ‘Doesn’t matter.’

The Squash Club

Tom strode jauntily out of the school car park and down the main road toward the squash club. He was feeling very pleased with himself and his performance in the Head's office. He'd told Julian what had happened, and he had laughed at the ridiculousness of it all. Tom had invited his HoD to the pub, but Julian was not only a devout family man, he barely ever drank and had declined gracefully.

Tom turned his face to the sun and grinned as he recollected the expressions on their faces when they were talking about charges. He laughed out loud as he recalled Shaun asking for another biscuit, and an old woman glanced at him dubiously as they passed each other on the pavement. Apart from the likelihood that Miss Clarke thought he was both incompetent as a teacher and just stupid as a human, the meeting could not have gone better. His job was intact, and he no longer thought of Shaun as the son of the devil. He could go back and teach 8X4 on Friday with his chin held high.

The squash club had a bar where staff from Brentmouth School often met to bemoan the events of the day, but being a Monday so early in

Stop Talking

the term, there were only a few teachers present. Pete Keaton and Jim Tyler – the two NQTs – were sitting in a corner with three lagers when he arrived, and Tom smiled triumphantly as he sauntered over.

‘I take it all went well then?’ asked Jim.

‘Yep. Clarke probably thinks I’m a total dick but apart from that...’ Tom shrugged.

‘So what happened?’ Pete enquired.

Tom regaled them with the story pretty much word for word. When he finished, his two friends leaned back, laughed, and raised their glasses in celebration.

‘Sorted then, mate,’ said Jim. ‘You’re right though – she definitely thinks you’re as dense as... well, Shaun probably.’

Tom looked at Pete.

‘Yeah, I agree,’ he said, absent-mindedly. ‘Sounds like you’re OK.’

Tom nodded and turned away. Something was wrong with Pete, but he hadn’t made it apparent enough for anyone to question him about it. They got along very well but the three of them had only known each other a week.

‘Did you hear about the kid in my tutor group blowing his hand off?’ asked Jim casually.

‘No, what happened?’ Tom asked.

‘Dunno really. His name’s Roy Welland. I’m told he’s been obsessed with guns and explosives since Year 7. He put a bomb together, took it to a party, and the bloody thing blew up before he could get away. He’s part of that crowd with long dyed hair who always wear T-shirts with satanic messages underneath their shirts.’ He sipped his drink, wrinkling

The Squash Club

his upper lip, as if the beer were causing his distaste. 'And tons of heavy metal jewellery,' he added, with equal disapproval.

'What a knob,' Tom remarked. 'Did he actually blow his hand off or did he just sort of graze a finger?'

'No, apparently he's lost most of his fingers.'

'Really?' Tom was surprised. He assumed by the indifferent way Jim had delivered the news that he was exaggerating. 'How do you know?'

'Some kids who were there told me, and Brian, the head of year, said Roy was at the hospital today. Doesn't know when he'll be back.'

'Well what the hell was he doing making a bomb in the first place, for fuck's sake? He must have intended blowing something up with it.'

'I think it was intended as a firework.'

'Oh.' Tom seemed satisfied by this explanation.

'But apparently he's tried to make explosive devices before, and he goes around blowing stuff up all the time.'

'Really.' Tom paused, losing sympathy immediately. 'What a knob.'

Pete shifted awkwardly on his stool. He had been staring out of the window as the others talked.

'What's wrong with you, you miserable bastard?' asked Tom, trying to buck him up.

'Little Year 7s give you shit again, did they?' Jim teased provocatively.

'You won't believe this,' Pete began slowly, 'particularly in light of what just happened to Tom, but I was accused of something myself today.'

'What?' asked Tom.

Stop Talking

‘Do you know who Aimee Hampshire is?’

‘Is she the one with the long, blonde, curly hair in Year 10?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Loud mouth, always flirting with everyone,’ Jim confirmed, nodding.

‘Yeah, anyway, I gave her a detention on Friday after school for repeatedly throwing bits of chewed paper at Steven Hilderley and then saying, “This school’s shit!” when I asked her for the third time to stop.’

‘Right, yeah – I remember you mentioning it,’ said Jim.

‘She came to my room, obviously in a strop, and ref...’

‘Is this on Friday?’ Tom interrupted.

‘Yeah, refused to sit down without me explaining why she was there. I explained it to her, having already done so directly after the lesson and in writing on a detention slip and, even though she had admitted to throwing paper at the time, tried to tell me she hadn’t!’

‘Sounds like Aimee,’ said Jim knowingly.

‘I reminded her that she had already admitted to it the previous day and she just denied it. I said, “I was there! Aimee, how can you try and tell me that you didn’t say something that you said to *me*! If you’re going to lie to someone, don’t lie to someone who was there!” Anyway, we argued about it, she got upset, went home and told her mum I molested her.’

‘What?!’ Jim and Tom cried simultaneously.

‘She claims I touched her on the leg and tried to kiss her.’

‘You’re joking!’ Tom said rhetorically. ‘What a bitch!’

‘What a stupid, stupid bitch,’ Jim agreed.

‘So how do you know this?’ Tom asked.

The Squash Club

‘Clarke came to see me this afternoon, period 5. Told me the mum was keeping her off school until I was suspended.’

‘She’s not going to is she?’

‘No. Not even Clarke is as bad as that. I’m not sure if she could, anyway.’

‘I think she could, actually.’

‘Yeah, she could,’ Jim reiterated, although he had a tendency to say things in a matter-of-fact way whether he was sure or not. ‘It just depends on how serious the Hampshires are about taking it any further. Bit like the case with him.’ Jim gestured toward Tom.

‘Keeping her off school makes it more pressing,’ said Tom.

‘Yeah, it puts pressure on Clarke to act sooner.’ Jim frowned. ‘This isn’t good, is it? I mean, all three of us are NQTs, and within a week, two thirds of us are in proper trouble.’

‘One third now,’ Tom amended.

‘Whatever!’ Pete exclaimed.

The three of them fell silent and considered the implications of the point. Jim leant forward.

‘Did you?’ he asked Pete quietly, his face serious.

‘What?’

‘You know... Did you?’

Tom laughed. ‘We could understand it if you did, mate. I mean, she is nearly fifteen, pretty...’

‘Nice tits,’ Jim added.

‘And you haven’t had any for a while...’

‘What are you talking about?’ Pete replied indignantly. ‘I had it a couple of weekends ago.’

Stop Talking

‘You *said* you did,’ said Tom, pretending to doubt him.

‘How would you know? You didn’t even know me then.’

‘Exactly – no evidence.’

‘What was she like? Long, blonde, wavy hair? Sort of young-looking?’ Jim asked, scratching his chin theatrically.

Pete laughed half-heartedly.

‘Sorry, mate,’ Jim apologised with sincerity. ‘It’ll turn out all right. Tom’s situation was worse. He had witnesses saying the kid wasn’t lying, and he still got away with it.’

‘Yeah, but he got away with it because the kid’s parents were as thick as pig shit!’ Pete pointed out. ‘Aimee Hampshire’s mum isn’t going to get confused about who’s pressing charges against who, or whatever it was he got them to think!’

‘OK, but it *is* your word against hers,’ said Tom. ‘I’m pretty sure that annuls any allegation she may have.’

‘Yep,’ Jim agreed, as if that resolved everything. ‘Drink up and let’s go into town. Crazy Horse has two for one ‘til seven o’clock.’

One slips through the Net

By Thursday, Aimee had diluted her story significantly. What she *meant* had happened was that Mr. Keaton had walked past her and his hand had brushed her leg, possibly accidentally. He had leaned toward her as he was speaking, which she'd assumed was an attempt to kiss her but might not have been. Aimee's mother was beginning to realise the fertility of her daughter's imagination and had sent Aimee back to school the previous day after enduring an embarrassing phone conversation with Heather Williams, the head of year. Heather had stressed the seriousness of the allegation and the devastating effect it could have on a teacher's career. When the mother subsequently questioned her daughter, the story softened and there was tangible guilt in her voice.

Pete, although cognisant of this development, had been dreading the lesson all week. He was relieved that the allegation had been exposed as, in Heather's words, "A complete load of bullshit", but was still very nervous about teaching Aimee again. He waited in his classroom at break for the bell for period 3 and watched the conscientious ones start to gather through the dirty windows of the corridor. He had seen Aimee in school

Stop Talking

that day, so he was fairly sure she'd be in his lesson. If she bunked off, she'd only exacerbate the trouble she had already created for herself.

The line steadily grew, but there was still no sign of Aimee or, indeed, any of her friends. Pete paced around his classroom in agitation. He was a laidback sort of bloke and unused to the feeling of tension that gripped him.

The bell rang and brought Pete sharply to his senses with a jolt of nerves that gave him butterflies in his stomach. He took a deep breath, got up off the table, and opened the door with a flourish to show he meant business. The line dutifully shifted against the wall to form a fairly straight queue, and Pete scrutinised the expressions on the faces of the fourteen-year-olds standing before him. He wondered how much, if anything, they knew about the allegation. He stood aside, and they filed into his classroom to their desks.

Just as he was closing the door, a hand appeared through the gap, followed by a shriek as Mr. Keaton almost trapped it. He quickly pulled back and the giggling face of Aimee's best friend, Tasha, fell through. Behind her, Nicki and Jordan shuffled in, making a typically adolescent, showy effort to keep from cracking up. *They* definitely knew something.

Mr. Keaton waited with his hand on the doorknob. The bustle and scrape of pupils taking seats died down and everyone except Aimee's posse looked at Mr. Keaton. He and Aimee's posse looked at the doorway. The rest of the corridor was silent save for the muffled cries of children enjoying undisciplined lessons.

Mr. Keaton leaned forward and stuck his head out into the corridor. He checked left – nothing except small piles of strewn litter and leftovers from break. Pete shook his head in disgust. He checked right and

One slips through the Net

nearly head-butted Aimee in the face (or kissed her on the lips, whichever way you looked at it). He instinctively jerked backwards and lost his balance. Trying to steady himself, Pete reached for the doorframe but missed and fell into a desk, crushing two girls against their seats. By the time he'd regained his balance, Aimee was halfway to her seat.

You twat, he thought. In terms of his standing with Aimee, he'd gone from riding a horse so high his head was partially obscured by cloud to falling over its neck into a steaming pile of excrement.

The class, meanwhile, had exploded into paroxysms of laughter at their teacher's buffoonery. His pride injured, Mr. Keaton turned and walked stiffly over to the blackboard. Ideally in these embarrassing situations, he knew the best thing to do was laugh with them, and normally he would. Unfortunately, he was too wound up and simply glowered as he stood there, hands clasped in front of him. Pete was even taller than Tom and, although not heavily built, cast an intimidating figure with his goatee and crew cut.

The laughing began to die until he could pinpoint the remaining culprits and stare them into silence, but he took care to avoid looking at Aimee. The last titters diminished into concealed smirks as Pete's anger fell slowly like a blanket. His next few words were crucial.

'The time is 11.25,' he stated, checking his watch, 'which means the lesson will end at 12.25 – five minutes into your lunchtime, unless you all manage to finish the work on time and to my satisfaction. That means every single one of you. Now, *without talking*... get your books out.'

Good recovery. Without a word, pupils set about putting equipment on the desk in front of them. Pete relaxed a bit and his gaze wandered casually around the room. Damn! He cursed under his breath.

Stop Talking

He had inadvertently exchanged glances with Aimee. She looked appropriately uncomfortable, however, and averted her eyes.

Pete waited patiently until the last book was given out and all movement had ceased, which was good for someone so inexperienced. To prevent losing the concentration of those who were ready, the temptation was to move on without waiting for the stragglers. All eyes now rested upon their teacher, who was balancing the composure of his pupils on a knife-edge. One silly remark and the class would erupt into giggles again.

‘Copy exactly what I write,’ he said, swivelling neatly to face the board.

“Judaism”

“Sep 14”

“The significance of fasting in Rosh Hashanah”

“As far back as the....”

Pete heard unrest behind him.

‘Sir?’

‘Yes?’

‘The date’s wrong.’

‘Well what is it, then?’ Mr. Keaton replied impatiently.

‘I think it’s the 15th.’

‘OK, put the 15th then.’

‘Or it could be the 13th.’

Mr. Keaton’s head rolled back slightly in exasperation, and he dropped his shoulders and turned. As predicted, disruption began to bubble

One slips through the Net

gently around the room like a hot tub. The boy who had spoken was in the front row and, until now in the term, had not raised his head above the surface.

‘It’s Mark, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Mark, you have ten seconds to find out the correct date or you will be scrubbing my blackboard at lunchtime. And as you can see,’ Mr. Keaton gestured toward the board, ‘it certainly needs it.’

‘I don’t know it sir – he told me to say it,’ the boy protested, pointing at the lad sitting next to him.

‘Eight seconds.’

‘Oh my God!’ the boy cried. ‘This is so unfair!’

‘Don’t blaspheme – you’re in a religious education lesson.’

‘Yeah but... OK, what is it?’ the boy asked, turning to his friend.

‘Dunno.’

‘Yeah, you do. Come on. You know you told me it was wrong, so you must know.’

‘Seriously, I don’t. I heard someone else say it was wrong.’

‘Five seconds.’

‘Oh my God!’

‘Don’t blaspheme – you’re in a religious education lesson.’ Pete couldn’t help but enjoy the child’s torment a little bit.

‘Someone tell me the date,’ the boy implored, looking at the ceiling as though for divine intervention.

‘15th...’ a voice called ‘...of October,’ it added, to appreciative laughter.

‘Two seconds.’

Stop Talking

The boy looked around beseechingly.

‘One second.’

‘It’s the 15th of September.’

Mr. Keaton looked up. In the furthest corner of the room, Aimee’s raised hand indicated that the voice belonged to her. Pete smiled inwardly.

‘Thank you, Aimee.’

He turned back to the board, changed the date, and prepared to continue.

‘You should know.’ Tasha’s hushed voice floated clearly across the room.

‘Shut up, Tash – I mean it,’ Aimee hissed, her eyes smouldering with aggression.

‘It’s six days since...’ Tasha dissolved into stifled giggles.

Pete heart slumped. He was going to have to deal with this after all.

‘Since what, Natasha?’ he asked.

‘Nothing, sir.’

‘No – come on – since what?’

Tasha said something but it was muffled behind her hand and the sniggering.

‘What did you say?’ Mr. Keaton persisted.

‘She said, “Your date”, sir.’ Jordan’s dulcet tones were clear and projected.

‘What do you mean by that, Natasha?’

Mr. Keaton knew he had a very delicate situation on his hands. Aimee looked ready to kill Tasha, and Pete had heard of her reputation for sudden, vituperative bursts.

One slips through the Net

‘Nothing, sir.’

‘No – what do you mean by date?’

‘You know what you mean,’ Jordan said reproachfully to Tasha, seeing Aimee’s glare.

Everyone in the class looked at each other in excitement, wondering what juicy nugget of gossip was about to be revealed.

‘No, I don’t,’ Tasha said defensively, suddenly feeling the attack change its focus. She sunk into her chair and her eyes fixed themselves on the pen lid she was nervously playing with on the desk.

‘See me after the lesson, Natasha.’

‘No.’

‘Sorry?’

‘No.’

‘What do you mean, “No”?’

‘I ain’t coming.’

‘You don’t have to go anywhere, you’ll already be here,’ Mr. Keaton pointed out.

‘OK, I’m leaving.’

‘If you do, you’ll make it a lot worse for yourself,’ Mr. Keaton warned.

‘Better than being molested.’

Everyone gasped. All but a few hadn’t the slightest idea what was going on, but they knew that to imply a teacher would molest a child was the worst insult in the profession.

Pete was momentarily dumbstruck by the audacity of the remark.

‘Get out!’ he ordered when his wits returned, his voice cracking with rage.

Stop Talking

Tasha hesitated as though she were about to refuse but thought better of it and stomped petulantly out of the room, slamming the door violently as she went.

Pete let the echo die and the dust settle as he tried to think of the best way to handle the situation. Awestruck, the class sat in silence and gawped at Mr. Keaton. What on earth was Tasha on about? Had their teacher done something bad? What if he had? He certainly looked as if he might have. Whatever it was, it had something to do with Aimee. Heads turned in her direction, but Aimee's bulging eyes were glued to the desk. Yep, they thought, it definitely had something to do with her all right.

'Copy what I write on the board, please,' Mr. Keaton said, coughing.

Copying was about all the class was capable of at that point. With sidelong glances, each pupil found a pen and slowly started writing.

Meanwhile, Tasha decided she didn't want to wait outside the classroom and ventured off down the corridor toward the Maths block. It was unfortunate that Tasha made this decision for a number of reasons, but mainly because Miss Clarke was giving a tour of the school to a young middle-class family with two daughters – one a prospective pupil and the other a mousy seven-year-old. As usual when showing visitors around, Hilary had deployed her small senior management team to patrol the corridors. Their task was to quell disturbances and forewarn her of areas that were anarchic and to be avoided completely. On this day, her pitiful little force was already overwhelmed, and Tasha wandered unnoticed.

Miss Clarke had quickly exhausted all of the pockets of the premises that she could go to safely and had taken a noticeably labyrinthine route to get to them. At one point, after being notified

One slips through the Net

discretely by a terrified Year 7 pupil of a riot in the languages block, she'd actually had to double back on the pretext of forgetting the quickest way.

At the east end of the south corridor, the small group said goodbye to Mr. Terry – a towering maths teacher with a formidable reputation for iron-fisted discipline – and followed Miss Clarke up the bank, well clear of the danger zones.

At that moment, Tasha appeared, strolling jauntily down the steps of the bank toward the group. Assuming unwisely that Tasha had been spotted and questioned, the Head thought it safe to talk to her.

‘Where are you going, Natasha?’ asked Miss Clarke, smiling at her entourage as if she and Natasha were best friends.

‘Keaton gave me a detention but I’m not going ‘cos I don’t want to get raped.’

Miss Clarke laughed in that odd, high-pitched way people do when they’re shocked and trying to buy time in an intensely embarrassing situation.

‘I’m sure you don’t mean that, Natasha,’ she said, again smiling at the group as if everything were perfectly in order. The only member of the family whose jaw was not on the ground was the younger daughter who, blissfully ignorant of what it was to get raped, gazed up at Tasha’s ferocious black eye make-up and spiky, highlighted hair in wide-eyed awe.

‘Yeah,’ Tasha persisted. ‘I don’t want him doing to me what he did to Aimee, do I?’

Miss Clarke again made the mistake of trying to brush this off as innocent, juvenile fun and laughed gamely.

‘I’m sure I don’t know *what* you’re talking about,’ she said, chuckling, ‘now why don’t you go on back to your class now, go on...’

Stop Talking

‘You don’t know what happened on Friday, miss?’ Tasha seemed aghast.

‘Yes, but there’s no need...’

‘Keaton tried to snog Aimee, miss, honestly – she told me!’

Miss Clarke wanted to strangle the blasted child until her tongue fell out. Why wouldn’t she drop it, the ruinous little cow?

‘Of course he didn’t, don’t be silly, Natasha. Now why don’t you go on back to your lesson.’

‘I’m not being silly, miss. Aimee told me. You ask her. She said so. This school’s *lame*.’

And with that, Tasha flounced off, her high heels echoing off the north and south walls of the quad. Miss Clarke stared after her, flummoxed into inertia, and then realised that she should show more of an objection to the school being described as ‘lame’.

‘Now come here, Natasha!’ she called after her, trying to sound authoritative. ‘Natasha!’

Natasha felt almost no inclination to obey Miss Clarke but was acutely aware of the several pairs of eyes on her back. She forgot what to do with her arms and walking suddenly became very awkward. Her long, skinny legs felt wooden and her high heels like stilts. Just when Miss Clarke could not imagine how things could get any worse, fortune vomited on her cornflakes again.

Natasha caught a toe on the lip of an uneven paving slab and lurched forward, dropping her gaudy little handbag.

‘Oh, fucking hell!’ she cried in abject embarrassment as she watched the contents spill everywhere.

One slips through the Net

The dismayed Year 10 pupil got down on her knees and started putting her predominantly cosmetic bits and pieces back into her bag. She could still feel the eyes of the family on her.

‘What are you looking at?’ she snarled, glaring at them viciously and shaking her head. ‘Fuck’s sake, losers.’

Realising that in the space of about a minute, the chance of these parents sending their daughter to Brentmouth Secondary had become zero, Miss Clarke accepted defeat and led them wordlessly back to the entrance.

It's all about Roy

Roy returned to school on Monday the next week. From the moment he walked through the school gates to the moment he left, he was the absolute centre of attention. It was impossible not to check out his hand. The thumb and little finger protruded almost comically from a mass of thick bandages. It was clear that he'd lost his ring and middle fingers, and his forefinger was heavily bound.

There was no doubt that, in his own strange way, Roy was enjoying the widespread interest around the school and had already learned to wiggle his good digits in a decidedly grotesque manner. Roy thought of it as a battle wound – visible evidence of his affiliation with the military. Although a reasonably intelligent boy, the long-term practical implications seemed not to bother him.

Roy waited a good minute after the first bell to make a dramatic late entrance to registration. It worked a treat. The hubbub of chitchat subsided, and everyone stopped what they were doing and stared. It was as if the person standing before them was no longer Roy Welland but some weird mutant or humanoid out of a science fiction movie. The

cumbersome Swiss army boots and ripped combat jacket heightened the impact, and Roy tried his hardest not to smirk at the looks of intrigue as he swaggered nonchalantly over to Mr. Tyler.

With his good hand, Roy tossed a note onto the register. His tutor regarded it for a moment, raised his eyebrows, and then looked up stonily at the new arrival. Under normal circumstances, the impudence of that action alone would have elicited a reprimand, but this was not normal circumstances. Turning his attention back to the note, Mr. Tyler carefully unfolded it and read the contents.

*"Mr. Tyler, please excuse Roy for being off school the past week.
He hurt his hand.*

*Yours sincerely,
J. Welland."*

Before he could stop himself, Jim snorted.

'What?' Roy asked.

'Nothing.' Mr. Tyler checked himself. 'It's just a bit of an understatement, that's all.'

'What do you mean?'

Realising that to inform Roy he'd permanently lost the accustomed use of his right hand was both obvious and tactless, Jim ignored the question.

'Were you... are you right-handed?'

'Yes.'

'So are you going to learn to write with your left hand, or will your right heal sufficiently?'

Stop Talking

‘These two fingers are missing,’ said Roy peevishly, holding his hand up so everyone could see, ‘and the flesh on the forefinger was blown to bits. So, no – it won’t heal sufficiently.’

Roy was well aware of the exalted status his injury afforded and was not going to miss an opportunity to flaunt his immunity by being rude.

Mr. Tyler was already losing sympathy. He wasn’t the most compassionate teacher in the first place and tended to adopt a rather unforgiving, old-school approach to handling children. At twenty-six, he was four years older than Pete and Tom, and the fruitless, unrewarding time he’d spent as a middle-manager in a paper business had made him a trifle bitter.

Every morning, Roy turned up late wearing huge, macabre gothic rings and a stud through his eyebrow, and every morning Mr. Tyler had to ask him to remove them. In response, Roy always tutted and shook his head as if Mr. Tyler had just come up with this rule specifically to make his life miserable. The boy’s manner was discourteous at the best of times, and his attitude insolent and abrasive. He was probably perfectly all right in Year 7, Jim reflected. Never mind – not much he could do to right the wrongs of four years at this place. Being enrolled at Brentmouth was a bit like a prison sentence for the debilitating effect it had.

‘Well, no time to waste then,’ said Jim, cracking his fingers. ‘Take off your rings, get rid of your eyebrow stud, and fill in this late slip.’

Roy tutted petulantly. ‘I’m not late.’

‘Well, you are.’

‘By one minute!’

‘You’re late every morning. If it was a one off I’d forget about it.’ In the circumstances, Mr. Tyler was being harsh and he knew it.

‘Sir!’ cried one of the more compassionate girls. ‘That’s a bit tight!’

‘Emily, you’re right. Sorry, Roy. Here, let me fill it in for you.’

‘I can’t take the rings off,’ Roy stated, daring his tutor to find a solution.

‘How did you put them on then?’

‘I’ve had them on since before the accident.’

Jim felt like congratulating Roy for his quick thinking.

‘Really? So without the use of your right hand and a left laden with metal adornments, some activities must have been quite difficult.’ There were no specific activities in Mr. Tyler’s head as he made the observation, but an unwelcome plethora arrived immediately afterwards.

‘Like what?’ asked Roy, giving Mr. Tyler the rope to hang himself.

‘Well, washing your hands for one.’

‘Do you mean washing my hand?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘What would I wash it with?’

‘Good point.’ Mr. Tyler paused. ‘OK, you’re telling me you’ve had those rings on for over a week?’

‘Yes! God’s sake!’ Roy shouted. For someone who was manifestly lying, he had worked up an impressive temper.

‘In that case you’ll have to get someone to do it for you. If the eyebrow stud’s a problem, I’ll give you a plaster to put over the top.’

The plaster was not Mr. Tyler’s idea – it was the latest answer from senior management for kids who said that to remove body jewellery would allow the hole to reseal.

Stop Talking

Roy's boots clomped loudly to the back of the room where the only girl in the tutor group who would speak to him proceeded to carefully remove the rings.

'How did you put them on?' she whispered, a little nervously.

'Just did it with one hand.'

'Do you want me to take the stud out?' she asked, hoping vehemently he'd say no.

'No. I'll stick a plaster on it for that prick and then take it off as soon as I'm out of here.'

'Shh... Roy!' she hissed, catching Mr. Tyler's glance. 'He could have heard that!'

'I couldn't give a shit.'

'What was that, Roy?' Mr. Tyler called. He knew the sorts of things the irascible Year 11 was probably saying to Lauren, but he wasn't in the least bit perturbed. To Jim, being hated by a pupil like Roy was a compliment.

'Nothing, sir. Have you got a plaster, then?'

'In my drawer.'

'Twat,' Roy muttered, getting up.

Mr. Tyler beamed as he passed Roy the packet. Roy flashed a fleeting grimace and shook his head in his inimitably ill-tempered way at his tutor's false friendliness. The bell rang for period 1 as Lauren applied a plaster to the stud, and the largely mute group filed out of the room. For fear of another altercation, Lauren gave the packet back to Mr. Tyler herself as they left.

Jim pretended to be concentrating on the register as the group departed but slyly watched his least favourite pupil out of the corner of his

It's all about Roy

eye. As anticipated, as soon as Roy stepped into the corridor, his good hand went up to his forehead and removed the plaster. Jim also caught the hand gesture that followed and chuckled. Some kids just didn't like making life easy for themselves.

Good Punch, Sir!

To their relief, the rest of the week passed relatively uneventfully for the three NQTs. There was no let up in animosity between Mr. Tyler and Roy, but neither was making much of an effort. Mr. Langston's second and third lessons with 8X4, although very basic, were much improved. Tom found that the best way to deal with Shaun was to assign him little jobs like giving out equipment and rearranging desks. Even the most menial of tasks gave him a sense of importance and kept him occupied. Pete's third lesson with Aimee was fine, largely because Tasha had been moved to another class.

Tom and Pete played basketball after school on Friday and let off steam. There was no better way to end a week of teaching than to play sport – particularly when you taught at a school like Brentmouth.

After the game, they grabbed something to eat and met Jim, who considered himself too short for basketball, down at the Bull and Bush near the beach. Pete was the first to the bar and ordered three beers and a round of tequila shots.

Good Punch, Sir!

‘Easy, mate!’ Jim exclaimed. ‘I’ll be home by half-nine at this rate!’

‘Any luck,’ said Tom, licking his hand and shaking the salt.

‘Here’s to finishing the third week of term without getting the sack!’ Pete toasted.

‘Tequila always makes me puke,’ Jim grumbled, knowing his objections would get him nowhere.

‘Just do it,’ Pete said.

‘If you do puke, you have to have another one,’ Tom warned.

‘And make sure you don’t get any of it on me,’ Pete added.

They chinked glasses and sunk the tequila. Jim made a face as if he had a mouth full of sick, but he managed to hold it down. Pete and Tom laughed and clapped him on the back. The bond between the three was growing.

‘How was Roy this week?’ Tom asked when Jim stopped grimacing.

‘Pain in the arse,’ Jim replied, shaking his head in a manner that was not dissimilar to Roy’s. ‘He’s always late and has an excuse. I have to tell him to lose his rings and all the bits of metal stuck in his face every single morning, and each time I say it, he acts like it’s a surprise! I’ve passed referral slips to the head of year, but if he has done anything it’s made sod all difference. Total waste of space that bloke.’ Jim shook his head again.

Tom frowned. ‘Yeah, I was thinking mainly about his hand.’

‘Oh yeah – the dinosaur claw. He’s never going to play the piano very well, mate. Got to learn to write with his left hand.’

‘Shit.’

Stop Talking

‘He loves it though. You should see him doing two-finger puppet panto in the yard at lunch. He even draws little faces on the tips of his thumb and little finger for effect.’

‘*He* draws them?’ Pete queried.

‘Yeah. He’s pretty good with his left as well as his... well, if he had a right.’

‘So he’s taking it well, then?’ Pete asked.

‘Seems to be, yeah.’

‘Doesn’t he realise how much of an impact it’s going to have on the rest of his life? I mean, even if he learns to use his left hand as well as his...’

‘What?’ Jim asked, smirking evilly.

‘As well as he *used* to use his right, OK? He’ll never be able to play...’ Pete stopped to consider all the things that Roy would no longer be able to play.

‘The violin?’ Jim finished.

‘Probably could actually,’ said Tom, considering a possible bowing grip.

‘Basketball,’ said Pete, as if it were key to life. ‘There’s no way he’d be able to play basketball.’

‘Couldn’t play basketball anyway,’ said Tom. ‘I did a PE cover with him a couple of weeks ago. He may as well have shot with his left hand to start with.’

‘Yeah, but he won’t be able to *hold* the ball,’ Pete persisted. ‘He won’t be able to chest pass properly...’

‘Couldn’t chest pass properly anyway – couldn’t pass properly. He was rubbish.’

Good Punch, Sir!

‘Look,’ Jim intervened, ‘to be honest...’

‘Hockey!’ Pete went on. ‘What about hockey? He won’t be able to hold the stick.’

‘Hockey?! What kind of knob jockey plays hockey?’ Tom exploded, and then grinned at the rhyming.

‘What’s the matter with hockey?’

‘Hockey’s for girls.’

‘No, it’s not.’

‘It is, mate. Only people who went to private school or grammar school play hockey.’

‘I went to grammar school!’

‘Do you play hockey?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because...’ Pete paused. ‘I prefer football.’

‘That’s because you’re not a girl.’

‘Unlike you.’

‘Hey!’ Jim interjected again, amidst the chuckling at how Brentmouth school playground-esque the conversation had become. ‘As much as I’m sure you could go on all night, I think Roy’s primary interests lie somewhere other than in sport.’

‘Really?’ asked Pete. ‘What?’

‘Shooting things.’

‘Like what?’

‘Rabbits, pigeons... any sort of bird, actually. Apparently, he’s also built all kinds of bombs before and used them to blow things up.’

‘Like what?’ Pete asked with intrigue.

Stop Talking

‘I don’t know, but he set one off in the exhaust of a police car once. At least, that’s what I read in his file.’

‘What happened?’

‘Dunno.’

Tom laughed. ‘Fucking hell, mate, just make it up! Who cares what actually happened? Tell us the whole thing exploded or something!’

‘The whole thing exploded and set the neighbouring car on fire, which had babies in it, and they all burned to death.’

‘Excellent,’ Tom said, approving the denouement. ‘Right, let’s move on. Where do you want to go?’

‘Don’t care,’ said Pete.

‘Crazy Horse,’ said Jim. ‘It’s two for one ‘til seven.’



By the time they reached Valbonne’s, a nightclub near Tom’s house at the top of town, all three were in danger of being too drunk to get in.

The bouncers took a long look at Jim before nodding begrudgingly and motioning them into the booming, debauched meat market. The place was rammed and Jim recognised a number of them immediately as Year 11 pupils from Brentmouth.

‘Be careful, fellas. Half of Year 11’s in here...’

‘And half the scientific experiments and social degenerates of Brentmouth,’ Tom added. He knew he was a bit of a snob and didn’t try to hide it.

Good Punch, Sir!

‘Well, it’s a fiver to get in and the drinks are cheap. I think girls even drink for free!’ Pete shouted over the distorted ABBA tune.

‘Joking!’ said Tom.

‘Nope.’

Tom surveyed the dance floor. It was monopolised by nubile, gyrating women whose screams and cackles were graciously drowned by the music.

‘Mind you, it’s not a bad idea,’ he observed.

‘You just be careful you don’t start chatting up a pupil,’ Jim warned, wagging a finger as he swayed about. ‘Chances are you wouldn’t know it if you were.’

‘How are we supposed to avoid it then?’ Tom asked.

‘Well, if they call you sir, or Mr. Langston, you might want to look out.’

‘Or cock, tosser or bell end,’ Pete added.

‘They’d have to know me to come up with that,’ said Tom. ‘You’d better listen out for lanky, elephant-eared gimp then.’

‘Easy!’ said Jim, knocking into someone at the bar.

‘Oi! Sir!’ a female voice shouted.

‘Here we go,’ Jim groaned, trying to disguise his pleasure at being hailed by a pretty girl.

‘Sir!’ A girl came bouncing over arm-in-arm with two giggling, drunk friends.

‘Hi, Melissa.’

‘Do you know Charlie and Sophie?’

‘Yeah. They’re always riding up in the woods, smoking,’ Jim slurred.

Stop Talking

Pete and Tom starting laughing. This was going to be funny on Monday morning. Not that Jim would remember any of it.

‘Eh?’ Melissa looked confused.

Jim hiccupped. ‘*Hiding up in the woods, smoking.*’

‘Behind the music block,’ Tom added, shouting so loudly that the veins on his neck stood out. ‘This one asked me for a light a couple of weeks ago.’ He jerked a thumb at Charlie and smiled. ‘You probably didn’t know I was a teacher, did you?’

‘Oh, yeah!’ Charlie dissolved into hysterics. ‘I fought you was just some geezer or something!’

‘I’m that as well,’ Tom replied.

‘What?’

‘Doesn’t matter.’

‘I know someone who fancies you!’ Melissa shouted in Mr. Langston’s ear loudly and shrilly enough for the surrounding people to hear and look over.

At the beginning of his teaching practice, Tom had been flattered when female pupils showed an interest in him or paid compliments. After a while, however, he discovered that most young, reasonable-looking teachers were subjected to the same undue attention, particularly if new. Nevertheless, Tom noted with satisfaction, it was him they were talking to, not Pete or Jim.

‘You do?’ Tom replied, feigning boredom. (The fact that he’d never do anything about it did not mean he didn’t want to know who it was.)

‘And ‘im.’ Melissa nodded at Pete. Tom became less buoyant.

‘What about Mr. Tyler?’ he asked in slight annoyance.

Good Punch, Sir!

‘Probably fancies him as well!’

‘She’s picky then.’

‘She ain’t picky at all, is she Charlie?’

‘Na, she’s a slapper, sir!’

‘She’s over there if you want to... you know...’

‘What?’ Tom asked, glancing at the girl they’d just pointed out. Just as well they did. He would never have known she was a Brentmouth pupil, and she was at least a six.

‘You know!’ The three girls looked at each other and howled with laughter. Tom maintained a straight face.

‘No? Do you know what they mean, Mr. Keaton?’

‘Nope,’ Pete replied, shaking his head innocently.

‘You do!’ Charlie shrieked, holding on to Sophie for support. Sophie seemed to be having fun but content to let the others do the talking.

‘No, we don’t,’ said Pete, prolonging the joke. Jim decided to put them straight.

‘They mean, if you want to get off with her, hic! she’s up for it.’

‘Ohh... *that’s* what they mean!’ said Tom sarcastically. ‘Anyway, thanks for the information, girls. Have a nice night.’

He turned away as additional confirmation that the conversation was over, and the three girls hesitated before rushing off to report to their friends, who had been staring across the whole time.

‘Did you see who they were talking about?’ asked Tom, leaning on the bar.

‘Was it the tall one in the black dress?’ Pete enquired.

‘Natalie something. She’s eleven,’ Jim stated, burping violently. ‘Year 11.’

Stop Talking

‘She was all right!’ said Pete.

‘I know!’ Tom agreed.

‘Give it a couple of years...’ said Pete suggestively.

‘Give it a couple of years and what?’ A short, stocky man with a balding, shaved head, who had been standing right behind Pete, squared up.

‘What’s it got to do with you?’ Pete replied, looking down at the man from 6’4” with his hardest, most derisive look.

‘She’s hus daughter, thaats wut!’ spat another man, standing beside him. He was taller than the first fellow with long, straight hair tied back in a ponytail. He was unshaven and spoke with a thick Scottish accent. Tom decided to even things up. Knowing that Jim was in no fit state to do anything, he moved forward purposefully between Pete and the newcomer.

‘If I’d have known she was your daughter, I wouldn’t have been talking about her in the first place. Sorry if I caused offence.’

‘You will be, you cocky bastard,’ the first man said.

‘Oi!’ Tom leaned toward the man, pointing at his chest. ‘My friend’s trying to be reasonable. We had no idea who you were. Why don’t you accept that and back off?’

‘Who the fuck are yuu?’ the Scot butted in aggressively, pushing Tom back with his forearm.

Onlookers began to clear a space, foreseeing the potential action and wanting no part.

‘Don’t be pushing me, mate,’ Tom hissed, feeling anger well up inside him and all of the muscles in his upper body go tight.

‘Tom, leave it. It’s not worth it,’ said Pete, employing the standard violence-avoiding lines. But even if Tom was willing to back down, the Scot definitely wasn’t. He pushed Tom again, causing him to step backwards. Pete tried to get between them but Tom had already lost it. He punched the Scot as hard as he could in the mouth and watched him fall over a table full of cocktails, smashing glasses and spattering people’s clothes with bright blue liquid.

The startled expression on the guy’s face as he disappeared over the edge of the table was comical in its cartoon dimensions. His bulging eyes rolled about in their sockets as he lay in the saturated lap of a squawking middle-aged woman, dazed for a moment, before the excruciating feeling of public humiliation in front of his south-town posse sent him into a rage. Sliding to the floor, he picked himself up unsteadily and lurched forward through the corridor that had formed in the crowd. Tom steadied himself but the semi-conscious Glaswegian never reached him; his friends blocked his charge and held him back. This only enraged the man further, and he strained against his captors, tears of frustration trickling from the corners of his eyes. Through bloody, crimson lips and pink teeth, he screamed torrent upon torrent of abuse about what he was going to do to his assailant. Tom, placated by the satisfaction of landing a good one, simply raised his eyebrows and regarded the struggling fellow with a half-smile of unbearable insolence.

The bouncers bounded over, shoving people out of their way with their customary lack of respect. Oozing self-importance, they grabbed the Scot roughly in a headlock and hauled him across the dance floor toward the exit. Unclear who the antagonist was, a bouncer decided to ask Jim. The square-jawed beefcake was considerably taller and about five stone

Stop Talking

heavier than the squat teacher, but the sight of the towering figure failed to create an impression. Jim didn't reply and just stood there gawping at the bouncer with a gormless expression on his face. Then, just as Pete moved to intervene, Jim's mouth started operating.

'That Scosh guy jus' stard having a go at me mate,' he drawled.

'What?' The music was turned up so loud the floor was vibrating.

Jim tried again. 'That Scosh guy jus' stard having a go at Tom.'

'Scosh guy? Who is Tom?'

'Sco – tish,' Jim enunciated, as if he were addressing a retard.

Pete winced. Jim was pushing his luck.

'OK.' The bouncer leaned closer. 'Who is Tom?'

'Tom's my mate.'

'Listen pal, are you taking the piss?'

Pete placed a hand on the bouncers arm. 'He's pissed, mate. Tom's over there. Don't worry, we'll...'

The bouncer threw Pete's hand off.

'You stay out of this. I'm not talking to you, all right?' The bouncer looked ready to explode into a flurry of fists. Pete backed off.

'Who is Tom?' he repeated, his face just inches from Jim's.

Pete groaned inwardly.

'Tom's that guy over there,' Jim replied, pointing to the bar where Tom was waiting to be served.

'Why did the Scottish guy start having a go at him?'

'Why?' Jim reiterated, searching his befuddled brain for a reason.

'Yes, why?'

'Because he didn't like him.'

'What? You mean they know each other?'

‘No...’ Jim looked as if he were going to embellish and then didn’t.

‘So why didn’t he like him then?’ the bouncer persisted, frowning impatiently. Jim suddenly remembered.

‘Because he,’ he pointed to Pete, ‘wanted to shag his daughter.’

Oh my God, Pete thought. The only thing that could sound worse than that was, ‘Because he wanted to murder his daughter.’

‘No, I did... don’t,’ Pete stuttered.

‘You want to shag his daughter, pal?’

The bouncer approached the accused, whose eyes met the other’s dead level. He desperately tried to think of a smooth way out of the situation, but with the alcohol slopping around his skull, couldn’t.

‘No, it was his *friend’s* daughter I was talking about,’ Pete corrected, as if that made all the difference.

‘You want to shag his friend’s daughter?’ The bouncer looked as surprised as he did violent.

‘Not now...’ Pete looked indignant. ‘In a couple of years.’

‘How old will she be in a couple of years?’

‘Dunno. Listen, she’s old enough to get into this dive now. She’s over there!’

The bouncer teetered on the edge between throwing this guy out and looking in the direction of Pete’s finger. In all the years he’d been a doorman, he’d never been given ‘wanted to shag his daughter’ as the cause of trouble. He gave in to his curiosity.

‘I see what you mean,’ he admitted after a moment, nodding his approval. ‘How old is she?’

‘Sixteen, actually.’

Stop Talking

‘Really?’

‘Yep.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I teach her.’

‘You’re a teacher?’

‘Yep. And he is,’ Pete jerked a thumb to where Jim had been standing, but he was no longer there. ‘I teach practically all of the girls on the dance floor.’

The bouncer whistled as he scanned the chains of grinding bodies.

‘You lucky bastard! Hang on,’ he said, pointing toward them. ‘Isn’t that your mate?’

There, in the middle of a circle of screaming girls, Jim was having the time of his life. Dancing as though his limbs were attached to the cross-frame of a blind puppeteer, every wild move was being applauded rapturously by shrieks and squeals.

‘Yep.’ Pete smirked. ‘That’s him.’

In the meantime, a different bouncer approached Tom at the bar.

‘You’re going to have to leave,’ he said flatly. ‘Do you know why?’

‘I guess so. Just let me tell my friends.’

Tom made his way over to where Pete was standing with the bouncer.

‘I’ve been asked to leave,’ he said.

‘Are you a teacher as well?’ the first bouncer asked.

‘Yes.’

Good Punch, Sir!

‘It’s all right – you don’t have to leave. I’ll have a word. Teachers...’ he said, shaking his head as he walked off. ‘I should have become a bloody teacher!’

‘What?’ Tom asked in confusion.

Pete proceeded to explain what had happened and then pointed out Jim on the dance floor. Tom laughed.

‘Well, bugger me. I suppose every job has its perks.’

They left Jim to it, got a drink, and Pete recounted the incident with Natasha the previous week. They had nearly forgotten the episode when a pupil came up and patted Mr. Langston on the shoulder.

‘Well done, sir. Good punch!’

Tom ignored the boy. This was the last thing he needed. An incident like that would spread like wildfire around school. Most of the older students would probably hear about it even before the weekend was out.

Deciding it was time to go, they pulled Jim away from his twirling harem and stepped out onto the foggy street. The cold night air sobered them up quickly, but thankfully, there were no signs of the Scot or any of his friends. In Brentmouth, trouble that began inside a club very often continued outside where there were no bouncers to put a stop to it. For the pleasant rural town Brentmouth appeared to be, there were a disturbing number of violent incidents.

‘How do you reckon we should deal with this?’ Tom asked the others after a contemplative pause.

‘Don’t say anything,’ said Jim resolutely.

‘Yeah, but he’s going to get asked about it, isn’t he?’ Pete argued. ‘Kids are going to come up to him and ask if it’s true.’

Stop Talking

‘Then deny it.’

‘But what if the father of that girl makes a complaint?’ Tom speculated.

‘What would he complain about?’ Jim countered. Apparently the dancing had worked some of the alcohol out of his system.

‘Well he might make a complaint about me thinking of porking his daughter in a couple of years!’ said Pete.

‘Deny that as well,’ said Tom, endorsing Jim’s standpoint. ‘He can’t prove it.’

‘To be honest, you’re OK,’ said Jim, pointing at Pete. ‘It’s Tom who could be in shit.’

‘You mean if the Scottish guy decides to press charges?’ asked Pete.

‘No?! Tom would just convince everyone that the other guy was on trial!’ Jim remarked, chuckling.

Tom looked unamused.

‘No, I didn’t mean that,’ Jim continued. ‘The chances of that Scottish nutcase pressing charges are extremely small. I heard the bouncers saying something about him always causing trouble as they dragged him out.’

‘Really? You remember?’ Pete asked, slightly surprised Jim remembered anything at all.

‘Yeah. He’s a sad, unemployed gypso,’ Jim said, revealing the bigoted side of his personality. ‘There’s no way he’s going to go to the police about this. No – what I meant was – Tom’s already been in trouble for allegedly manhandling a pupil. If this does get back to school, it will only serve to fuel his reputation – no matter how undeserved.’

Good Punch, Sir!

Jim came across sincerely, but he was beginning to wonder just how ‘undeserved’ it really was.

‘Hang on though. How much of that conversation did the dad hear?’ Tom queried. ‘How does he know who we are? He could just have heard us talking about his daughter.’

‘The girls came over shouting, “Sir”!’ Pete reminded him.

‘That’s true,’ Tom conceded. ‘Do you think he heard that?’

‘Probably. Didn’t mention it though,’ said Pete.

‘I’m sure he did,’ said Jim emphatically. ‘And in any case, half the club saw Tom hit that bloke, and half of them were probably Brentmouth pupils. He knocked over a table full of drinks into about ten people! No, it’s bound to get back.’

‘Anyway, you’re right – some kid came up to me and said, “Good punch”,’ Tom added.

‘Still, as we have no idea when, or how, it will get back, I think we should act like it never happened,’ Pete concluded. ‘On Monday, if any kid comes up to us and asks about Friday night, we don’t have the faintest idea what they’re talking about. Yeah?’ Pete looked at Tom for approval.

‘Yeah,’ Tom mumbled despondently.

Pete looked at Jim.

‘Yep.’

The Note

Tom got to school early on Monday to make sure he didn't encounter any pupils on the way. He had decided not to tell Julian about the incident. The new teacher didn't want to put his line manager in an awkward position and, in any case, didn't want him to get the wrong impression. The lock clicked with its familiar echo and Tom shoved open the door. A piece of lined A4 lay on the floor before him with a bold message written in black felt tip. The letters had been drawn carefully using a stencil and simply read, "*YOU'RE DEAD*".

Tom laughed scornfully. He stepped over the note and set his case down on his desk. What sort of imbecilic dimwit thought that would be funny? He left it where it was and began to get his stuff out ready for first lesson. Suddenly, he stopped. Of course! It wasn't a joke, was it? It was connected to the events of Friday night. Tom had never received a written threat before and felt a prickling fear seep through him. Angry at his cowardice, he picked up the note and nearly tore it up. He caught himself in time. Any sort of threat should be reported – particularly a written one. The trouble was that they would ask him why he thought someone might

The Note

want to threaten him, and the plan was to keep it quiet. He folded the note and placed it in his jacket pocket.

Tom finished what he was doing and made his way swiftly up to the art corridor to find Jim leaning over his desk, meticulously preparing resources with the radio merrily dishing out a tinny rendition of *Manic Monday* by The Bangles. Jim did not hear Tom's entrance and started when Tom tapped him on the shoulder.

'Oh, bloody hell, mate! Nearly had a heart attack!' Jim went back to his organising. 'What are you doing here so early?'

Tom opened the note and placed it on the desk in front of him.

Jim stared at the note and then stood up slowly.

'Where did you find it?'

'On the floor at the entrance of the hut.'

'Do you think it's got something to do with what happened at the weekend?'

'I think it's got to.'

'Shit.'

'I know.'

'Have you shown this to anyone else?'

'Not yet.'

'What about Pete?'

'I'll show it to him but that's it.'

'So you're sure you want to keep it quiet?' asked Jim, his face serious. 'You know if you don't show that note to anyone now, you won't be able to show it to anyone later.'

Tom sighed. 'Yep.'

Stop Talking

‘Probably nothing, mate,’ said Jim dismissively, trying to be optimistic.

‘I know.’

•

After school, the trio met at the squash club. Jim ordered while Tom showed Pete the note. Pete blew out a long, heavy breath and looked at it thoughtfully before he spoke.

‘Can you think of any reason, other than one connected to Friday night, why someone might have written this, or any inane reason why some stupid kid might have done this for a joke?’

‘I think even the most emotionally unsound, intellectually impoverished kid who has compounded his or her misfortune by attending our place, would realise this would not be received as a joke.’

‘Put it like that – I’m not so sure!’

‘Well, if they were that challenged, they would have spelled, “you’re” – y-o-u-r.’

‘I suppose.’

Jim came over and set the drinks on the table. ‘What do you think, Keaton?’ he asked.

Pete yawned and shook his head. ‘I don’t know. If it doesn’t have anything to do with Friday, it’s extremely coincidental. What time did you get to school?’ he asked Tom.

‘Eight o’ clock.’

‘Right, so the chances are, someone came in over the weekend.’

The Note

‘Exactly,’ Tom agreed. ‘Why would they bother to do that unless it was connected?’

‘Who do you think could have written it, then?’ asked Jim.

‘Well, that’s the thing. We knew it was bound to get back to school, but who would want to threaten me as a result? It’s not as if I hit Natalie’s dad or anything.’

‘I know.’ Jim paused. ‘Maybe the Scottish pillock found out who we were, found out that Tom was a music teacher, and delivered the note himself.’

‘It’s possible, but he’d have to know where the music block is *and* which side I teach in,’ Tom pointed out.

‘A pupil could have helped him,’ Pete suggested.

‘You mean Natalie?’ asked Tom.

‘Possibly. Or one of her friends.’

‘Doesn’t fancy me anymore then,’ said Tom, pretending to be crestfallen.

‘Teenage idolatry is fickle, mate. She probably still fancies me though.’

‘Not if her dad tells her what you said!’

‘He wouldn’t. And it’d probably turn her on anyway.’ Pete winked at Tom.

‘We all went into teaching for our own reasons.’

‘He’d have to come up with *some* explanation of why it all kicked off, though,’ Jim continued, trying to steer the conversation back to the issue at hand.

Stop Talking

‘Yeah, but Pete’s got a point,’ Tom conceded, ‘it’s unlikely he’d tell Natalie he started it to defend her honour or some chivalrous crap like that. She’d just be even more embarrassed.’

‘Whether or not she knows about the comment, she, and her mates, either saw or got told about Tom hitting Natalie’s dad’s friend. That means they have a motive.’ Jim pursed his lips, nodding slowly. ‘They have a motive,’ he repeated quietly.

‘You ever considered being a copper?’ Pete joked.

‘Have actually.’

‘I suppose it’s possible...’ said Tom.

‘What, Jim being a copper?’ Pete interrupted, antagonistically.

Tom ignored him. ‘...but I just can’t imagine any of those girls doing something like that.’

‘Doing what? Whatever it is, Jim would be well up for it.’

‘Shut up!’ Jim snapped, shaking his head in his usual, exasperated way.

Tom smiled as he waited until the barrage ceased.

‘You know,’ he continued, ‘finding a gap in the fence, crawling through on hands and knees, getting briars and thorns caught, high heels wedged in the ground. Just seems unlikely. Having said that, there’s a pretty good route through the woods near the music block – you just have to climb down a steep bank.’

‘No, you’re right, they’d fall down that and break one of their bony, spindly legs,’ Pete chortled, picturing it. ‘Then Jim’d probably take advantage...’

The Note

‘Having fun, are we, with our sexually-repressed imagination?’ said Jim, with more than a hint of irritation. He turned to Tom. ‘They could have just told Scotty where to go.’

‘Yeah, but they just don’t seem the conniving type,’ Tom replied, frowning.

‘And besides, why would any of them want to?’ said Pete, finally engaging sensibly. ‘Plus, it seems a bit sad and desperate to have to employ the services of a child to deliver a death threat.’

‘And I’m sure if Natalie’s dad knew about it, as I’m sure he would if he’s that close to the jock, he would have objected. A note like that in the wrong hands, and the whole thing could snowball into a much bigger deal,’ said Tom, with a strange edge.

Both Pete and Jim heard the unfamiliar note in Tom’s voice and looked at him quizzically. Tom was staring into space.

‘Also, blokes like that get into fights all the time,’ said Jim, glancing at Pete and raising his eyebrows. ‘He wouldn’t have taken it so personally that he’d bother with all this clandestine, cloak-and-dagger bullshit. If he really felt aggrieved about it, he’d wait until he saw Tom out again, get a couple of his mates together and jump him.’

‘Cheers, mate. Anyone fancy a beer in town later?’ said Tom, snapping out of it.

‘No, it’s more likely he’s got a kid at the school himself,’ Jim continued, half to himself.

‘But he’s Scottish!’ Tom blurted.

‘So?’

‘I don’t know any Scottish kids at the school.’

Stop Talking

‘Doesn’t mean there aren’t any,’ Jim countered. ‘Besides, how would you know? If the kid’s been brought up down here, he would speak with an English accent.’

‘Craafty little buggerrr!’ Tom said, affecting the local rural accent with limited success. ‘To be honest, I just assumed he was another itinerant Scottish piss head who prefers sunshine when he’s standing in the dole queue.’

Pete and Jim laughed.

‘You’re spending too much time around him!’ Pete said, gesturing toward Jim.

‘Tell it as you see it, mate!’ said Jim. ‘Nothing wrong with that!’

‘You’re right though,’ Tom admitted. ‘It is possible he’s got a kid at the school and they somehow did this together.’

‘But hang on, for the reasons you just explained, that makes it *less* likely to be him,’ Pete argued. ‘As you said, if he got found out, he and any kid of his would get into serious shit. The kid would be permanently excluded and he’d go to court for whatever the offence is that has to do with threats.’

‘Threatening Behaviour,’ said Tom.

‘Yeah. Threatening Behaviour. And possibly trespassing as well.’

The untouched lager on the table fizzed idly as each pondered the mystery.

There was no doubt in Tom’s mind that, assuming this wasn’t all some silly tasteless prank, the threat was an empty one designed purely to unsettle him. All the same, he badly wanted to find out who did it, whoever it was. He would watch out for kids looking at him and...

The Note

‘What if it is a kid who’s written it, they are connected with Friday, but did it of their own volition?’ Pete ventured.

‘You mean... no one else knows they did it?’ asked Tom, his mind running through a multitude of new possibilities.

‘Probably, but more importantly, no *adult* knows they did it. No one with enough common sense to stop them.’

‘You include the idiots on Friday in that group?’ said Jim contemptuously.

‘Definitely. They may be lacking in social graces, but they’re not stupid and they’re definitely streetwise enough to know not to do something like this,’ Pete said, warming to his theory. ‘And, they’re not the type of guys who’d leave a stupid note underneath someone’s door like some scheming psycho. No – this was a kid with a penchant for sinister games and a dissolute imagination.’

‘What the fuck does that mean?’ Jim asked in annoyance at his ignorance.

‘What?’

‘Dissolute, or whatever.’

‘Unhampered by moral restraint.’

‘Good. Can tell you’re an RE teacher.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Not a compliment.’

Tom found this new angle compelling. ‘And this kid is likely to be a close relation of one of the two guys – just not Natalie.’

‘It could be Natalie, but I doubt it. She doesn’t seem the type.’

‘OK,’ Tom paused, considering options. ‘What do you think we should do?’

Stop Talking

‘First of all, we find out if either of them have children, or nephews or nieces, at the school.’

‘How are we going to do that?’ Jim knitted his eyebrows. ‘We don’t even know the Scottish guy’s name.’

‘We can check to see if Natalie’s got any siblings by searching under her surname in SIMS,’ said Pete. ‘Finding out about cousins will be more difficult, of course, particularly if they don’t share the same surname.’ He paused and scratched his head. ‘Not sure how to find out the name of the Scot,’ he continued uncertainly. ‘And we’d have to use a computer in the office because they’re the only ones that have SIMS. It might look a bit suspicious.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Tom, smiling smugly. ‘I think I might know someone who’d do it for us.’

‘Yeah – who’s that?’ Jim enquired.

‘Just another of my many conquests.’

‘Bollocks – who?’

‘Liz, from the office.’

‘Bollocks – when?’

‘Weekend before last. Met her in Valbonne’s as it happens. A mere stone’s throw from my house.’

‘Bollocks.’

Murder, She Wrote

Outside Jim's classroom, on Wednesday afternoon, the rain poured down in a relentless stream. Pupils counted the seconds between the intermittent claps of thunder and the following flashes of lightning. The eye of the storm was close over the seaside town of Brentmouth and it had made everywhere dark and gloomy. The sobering effect it had on everyone's mood was palpable, Jim observed. He cast an eye over his GCSE art group. Normally, he would have had to tell this garrulous bunch to quieten down every five minutes, but today they were silent, earnestly sketching the musical instrument on the table in front of them. Still, he reflected, it was conducive to hard work.

His gaze settled on Roy. After the accident, as sensitively as he was ever able to be, Jim had asked his surliest, most fractious pupil if he wanted to continue with art. Roy's portfolio was thin, and although the pieces he had completed were good, they did not fulfil the requirements of the exam board. Most of the pictures contained some sort of weapon, cleverly disguised in the undergrowth of a landscape or, in one instance, hanging up on the wall in the reflection of a mirror. The central theme in a

Stop Talking

recent series was wildlife. Roy had drawn an army of evil rabbits on horseback chasing naked humans across a field. It was remarkably detailed and vivid, and Mr. Tyler had looked at the picture for some time before disallowing it. 'Roy, you have talent,' he'd said with exasperation, 'and if the rabbits were foxes, or something, I could see your point. But you know as well as I do that this drawing has more to do with your obsession with warfare and guns than anything to do with wildlife. Am I right?' Roy had sullenly admitted that he was and since then had not submitted anything that reflected his ability.

When the question was asked, however, Roy made the decision to continue with art and learn to use his left hand. If he dropped the subject, he'd only have to spend the remainder of the lessons that year revising for other subjects, which to him was unthinkable. Progress, however, had been slow. He was gradually learning to write more legibly but it was incredibly frustrating. The novelty among pupils of his mutilated hand had worn off and people paid less and less attention to it. He'd removed the bandaging on his forefinger prematurely to bring back interest and for the last few days it had worked. Roy regarded it phlegmatically. Most of the skin had been replaced by leaking, angry scar tissue and much of the muscle was damaged beyond repair. The two factors combined restricted movement considerably, and the pain of touching anything was still too great for him to use it properly.

The rain continued to drum monotonously on the windowsills and the scratching of pencils added to the hypnotic ambience. Roy just sat and stared at his disfigured finger, twiddling a pencil in his left hand. The paper lay before him untouched. Jim stood silently and wandered over.

Roy could feel his teacher's presence behind him but sat resolutely ignoring him.

'Have you tried drawing anything with your left hand yet?' Mr. Tyler asked quietly, squatting next to him.

'No,' Roy replied irritably. Mr. Tyler ignored the belligerent tone.

'Why don't you start with something simple?' he suggested amiably. 'Instead of drawing the whole cornet, why don't you just do the mouth piece?'

'Yeah, that would be interesting.'

'OK, draw something else, but keep it simple and don't bother with the detail.'

Roy mumbled something that Mr. Tyler didn't hear.

'Pardon?'

'What?' Roy responded aggressively.

'I thought you said something.'

'No?' Roy turned away and covered up his paper.

Jim rose and left him to check on the progress of other pupils. His tolerance threshold was higher than usual, and despite his dislike of the boy, Jim did pity him. At sixteen years of age, no one deserves to have his hand blown off, even if he did shoot animals for fun. On the other hand, Jim thought, grunting humourlessly at the pun, if it were going to happen to anybody, it might as well happen to Roy.

Jim stood at the window in his stereotypical teacher pose, hands clasped behind his back. He was slightly below average in height but broad-shouldered and sporty-looking. His prominent square jaw was always unshaven, and his dark hair was curly and a little wild. Apart from

Stop Talking

that, however, he was well groomed and, unlike Pete or Tom, had an eye for fashion, always verging on the trendy side of smart in his work attire.

The art classrooms were on the second floor of the north building and looked out onto the staff car park. Raindrops were hammering on the roofs of the cars and creating an ethereal white film over the top. Behind the cars lay a waterlogged playing field bordered by a long line of mature fir trees, which grew in stark contrast out of the permanent drifts of windswept litter. A pupil on some errand came running around the corner holding a bag over his head for protection. He passed under the window and disappeared out of sight, leaving the verdant shimmering view curiously still again.

Jim glanced at Roy and noted with satisfaction that he was actually doing something. For the remainder of the lesson, Jim eased back in his chair, blanked his mind, and let the pupils get on with their work. Compared to his previous job, this was heaven. What better way to spend a dreary autumnal afternoon than to slip into a trance and let it drift by?

At the end of the day, the pupils placed their drawings in a pile and left, mildly jaded. They were unfamiliar with such a protracted spell of unbroken concentration. Jim packed up his things into his pilot case and paused on his way out to scan a few of the pieces. Most were better than usual, but Roy's was so poor it was hard to make out. Drawn in heavy, shaky strokes it looked like a man standing in the rain with a ball in his hand. He peered more closely. The man's mouth was open as though imbibing the raindrops, and his arms were extended outwards. It looked as if the figure were reciting an incantation to some celestial being. Whatever it was, it was bloody awful, thought Jim. Then he stopped and looked carefully at the man's face. Roy had drawn a thin scar on the man's left

cheek in exactly the same place as Tom had one. Was this a picture of Mr. Langston? he asked himself. Then it dawned on him. The man wasn't speaking – he was singing. Singing in the rain! Mr. Langston, singing in the rain and playing basketball... or something. Jim laughed as he dialled Tom's number. Why would Roy draw such a bizarre picture?

Tom flicked the power switch off for the music hut, dropped an irreparable cabasa into the bin and pulled his mobile out of his case.

'Hiya.'

'All right, mate. You doing anything?'

'No.'

'Come up to my room – I've got something that'll make you laugh.'

When Tom saw the drawing he did indeed laugh. He sometimes forgot that he had a scar on his face and no longer noticed it in the mirror. At that moment, the door opened and Pete walked in.

'Have a look at this!' Jim called. 'Roy's basketball lesson with Tom obviously made a lasting impression!'

Pete bent over the picture, looked back at the other two with a frown, and then bent over it again. 'You think that's a basketball he's holding? Looks like a bomb to me.'

'What?' Jim exclaimed, hoping he hadn't missed a crucial detail. He and Tom took another look.

'There's a tiny little fuse coming out of the top – look.' Pete pointed at it with a pencil.

'Well, bugger me, you're right. Shit!' Jim swore, angry with himself.

Stop Talking

Tom sat back on the desk, also feeling a bit foolish. And then something occurred to him. The person who had written him the note had used a stencil. If Roy had written that note, the only way he could have done it without it looking suspicious would have been to use a stencil. He walked over to Jim's stock cupboard and pulled out a boxful.

'Are these standard?' he asked Jim.

'Yes.'

'Did you order them through the school?'

'Yes. Why?'

'So you couldn't get them from high street shops.'

'Unlikely.'

Tom pulled out the note from his jacket pocket and placed the stencil over the Y. It was a perfect match. Tom slapped the table triumphantly.

'Not only is Roy in your tutor group and therefore within easy reach of a stencil,' he said, jabbing a finger at the stock cupboard, 'he also could not have written this note without one.'

'Bloody brilliant!' Pete shouted. 'It's like an episode of *Murder, She Wrote* in here.'

'You watch that?' Tom asked.

'Now and then.'

'Stop watching it.'

'I like Angela Lansbury, though.'

'Stop watching it.'

'Did you speak to Liz about possible relatives of those two blokes?' Jim intervened.

‘Yes – she checked Natalie’s family,’ Tom replied, ‘and it turns out she’s an only child. I haven’t managed to find out the Scottish guy’s name yet, so obviously I haven’t been able to check up on him.’

‘I wonder if he meant me to realise that’s supposed to be you,’ Jim pondered.

‘Well, everyone knows I have a scar on my cheek.’

‘Yes, but it’s drawn very small in the picture. I barely noticed it, and besides, if he wanted you to know he wrote the note, why didn’t he make it more explicit? By doing it subtly, he can’t be sure either way. No – I don’t even think he intended to draw you at the beginning. I think he looked outside at the rain, drew a figure, thought, singing in the rain, put a bomb in his hand – either because he always puts some sort of weapon in his pictures, or because he just blew his own hand off – *then* thought of you and added the scar.’

‘Well if it’s that arbitrary, it might not be him then,’ said Pete in disappointment.

‘That on its own would not be a compelling case. That, with the stencil theory, is a compelling case. Both, with a connection to the Scottish guy, and it’s beyond doubt.’

‘OK,’ said Tom. ‘I’ll ask Liz to check Roy’s records now.’

Energised by the discovery, Tom walked briskly down to the office to catch Liz before she left. She was already at her car, hastily chucking some rubbish onto the backseat during a respite in the weather, when Tom found her.

‘Hi, Liz!’

‘Tom.’ Her manner was as off-hand as it had been the previous morning.

Stop Talking

‘Hi. I’ve just found out something about what I was telling you yesterday morning, and I could really do with you checking it for me.’

‘What, now?’

‘Yes, sorry, but it would be really useful and could make all the difference.’

Tom hadn’t been specific about his request. The way he’d described it, he could have been investigating a case of child brutality, he thought, feeling oddly unsettled at the thought.

‘Um... I’ve got to catch the post before five o’ clock, but OK, just let me put these things in my car and I’ll bring the system back up again for you.’

‘Thanks, Liz.’

Tom was so grateful, he felt he should return the favour somehow, particularly with the view she was presenting to him as she leaned over the driver’s seat. He knew she was angry with him for not phoning. It had been a week and a half since they met at Valbonne’s, and Tom knew that that was way too long to leave the phone call without it being obvious he wasn’t interested.

‘I tried to call you on Saturday but I must have put your number in my phone wrong.’

‘You didn’t put it in, I did.’

‘You did?’ Tom searched his memory but it was blank.

‘Yes.’ Liz replied, shutting the door with unnecessary force.

‘Well, you must have put it in wrong then because I definitely tried to call,’ Tom said earnestly, looking hurt that she could even imply he was lying.

‘You were pissed, weren’t you?’

‘Hardly! I may have had a few but nothing...’

‘How did we get in to your flat?’ Liz regarded him superiorly as she unlocked the door to the office. Tom was beginning to wish he hadn’t been so damned thoughtful.

‘We didn’t just walk in?’

‘No,’ Liz said, smiling.

‘OK, how did we get in then?’

‘You lost your keys so you ran back to Valbonne’s to find them. When you got there I don’t know what happened, but you decided to stay for a drink anyway, leaving me standing outside your flat at one o’ clock in the morning.’ Liz sat down heavily at her computer and began tapping.

‘How do you know that?’

‘Because I phoned my friend, who was still in there, and she saw you at the bar.’

‘Oh.’

‘She asked you where I was and you came running back. Do you know what you said?’

‘No.’ Tom was getting annoyed. Just because he wanted a file didn’t give her the right to speak to him as if she were his mother.

‘You said,’ Liz paused dramatically and turned round, ‘why didn’t you just go inside?’ She laughed scornfully. ‘You only went and forgot why you’d gone back!’ she added, as though spelling it out heightened the humour.

‘OK, well my memory isn’t all that good.’

‘Do you know how we got in?’

‘No, still can’t remember.’

‘You pulled up your window and climbed through.’

Stop Talking

‘Right,’ Tom said irritably. ‘No big deal then.’

‘Except...’ Liz snorted as she tried to contain herself, ‘...as you were doing it, your keys fell out of your pocket!’ Liz’s laughter became so intermittent and guttural as she ran out of breath that it sounded like the braying of a donkey.

‘Anyway, how’s it going with the file then?’ Tom said stiffly, reminding her of the business at hand. Liz turned back to the screen, smirking. She hit a few buttons and the surprisingly cute features of a little Year 7 Roy Welland appeared.

‘What do you want to know?’

‘Who his father is.’

Liz hit a few more buttons so quickly it sounded like rain on the roof of a tent. She didn’t even look at her fingers, Tom noted with begrudging admiration.

‘James M. Humphrey. It looks like his parents divorced and she took custody. She went back to her old name and changed Roy’s with it. Doesn’t look like she remarried.’

‘Right,’ said Tom, writing it down. ‘Can I have the contact details?’

‘There’s a mobile number and that’s it. No address.’

Tom made a note of that and thanked her as he made to leave.

‘Tom?’

‘Yep?’

‘You really tried to call me?’

‘Yeah. What a nightmare with the number and everything.’

‘Do you know how you’ve got it in your phone?’

Oh God, not more questions. ‘I thought you said you put it in.’

‘I did – by phoning you.’

Tom rolled his eyes and made a quick exit. What did he care, anyway? He had what he wanted now.

‘Got the name and a mobile number,’ said Tom, when he reached Jim’s art room. Both of his friends were lying across the tables on their backs and laughing at the dusty, faded old paintings the previous art teacher had forgotten about and left stuck to the ceiling.

‘Yeah? Excellent,’ said Jim, sitting up. ‘Well, go on then.’

‘What? Phone him?’ Tom laughed. ‘OK. What do you think I should say? Hello, did you have a good time on Saturday? How’s your lip?’

He hesitated for a moment, considering how to make the call without Mr. Humphrey knowing who it was. Tom dialled 141 to make the call untraceable before entering the Scot’s number.

‘Hullo?’

‘‘Allo,’ Tom greeted, affecting a ludicrously exaggerated cockney accent. ‘Can oi spoik toe James ‘amphroi ploise?’

‘Speaking. Who’s th...’

Tom hung up and stared at his phone for a few seconds. ‘It’s him.’

‘It’s him?’ asked Jim.

‘Yep. It’s him.’

‘What now then?’ Pete asked.

‘I’m pretty sure Roy didn’t intend the drawing to be a clue,’ said Tom, summing things up in his head. ‘He drew it with his left hand and it *is* crap. As Jim says, he probably added the scar as an afterthought. If he wanted to leave a clue he’d have made it more obvious, and he would have

Stop Talking

left it with me. He wouldn't assume we know each other well enough to be talking about all this stuff.'

'Good point,' Pete agreed.

'And it's good that we know it's him without him knowing we do.'

'OK, so what are you going to do?' asked Jim.

'Nothing. Sit back and see what happens.'

Tuna and Tango don't go

Pete straddled the old, scarred school table, his long legs swinging over either side as he munched on a tuna and cucumber sandwich. He gazed out of the grimy, guano-spattered, rotating window from the second-floor classroom and waited for his notorious Year 10 core RE class. The sky was clear and not a whisper of a breeze ruffled even the tiniest frail golden leaf of the dying summer. The rain of the previous day had continued to fall into the night, leaving the air fresh and the playing fields soggy and embedded with dark footprints where unsuspecting children had ventured out to play. Two sizeable groups were still playing football on the drier upper section, even though the bell for lesson two had rung, and as he watched, Pete suddenly got the urge to do something about it. He moved to the large window, swung it open and stuck his head out.

‘Oi!’ he yelled. ‘The bell’s gone. Break time’s over. Get to your lessons now!’

Some of the pupils turned when they heard the sound of Mr. Keaton’s voice, but they continued with their game regardless. Pete sighed

Stop Talking

and withdrew. Pupils were gathering in the corridor, and although last week's lesson with Aimee had gone well, he still felt nervous and uncomfortable about having her in his class.

Mr. Keaton opened the door and gangly adolescents piled in rambunctiously, tripping over each other and swearing. Aimee slipped by at the front of the queue but carefully avoided eye contact with her teacher. It wasn't until long afterwards that it occurred to Pete how unusual it was that she had arrived early. He pulled the door shut and walked to the blackboard, whereupon he seized a fresh, perfectly cylindrical white piece of chalk from the tray and waited for silence.

A hand went up.

'Put your hand down, Lorraine, you can ask questions when we've got quiet.'

The hand stayed up but now flapped urgently for attention.

'Lorraine, put your hand down.'

'But sir...'

'Lorraine!' Mr. Keaton barked.

'OK, fine,' Lorraine replied, huffing and folding her arms.

Pete glanced at her, puzzled by her persistence. Lorraine was one of the few pupils at Brentmouth who seemed immune to the pandemic indiscipline, and it was certainly out of character for her to pout.

'OK. What is it, Lorraine?' asked Mr. Keaton finally, deciding it may be important.

'You've got drink spilling on your jacket, sir!'

Mr. Keaton looked over at his jacket where it was draped across his desk beside his lunch box. A can of Orange Tango lay on its side with

liquid steadily flowing out everywhere. Mr. Keaton cursed under his breath, righted the can and cleared his desk with a sweep of his arm.

‘Whose can is this?’ Mr. Keaton asked angrily, as he suspended the jacket at arm’s length and watched the liquid drip down one sleeve onto the carpet. ‘Come on, I know it belongs to someone in here. It wasn’t there before the lesson.’

Lorraine’s hand went up again. Mr. Keaton looked at her doubtfully.

‘Yes, Lorraine?’

‘It isn’t mine, sir,’ she said.

‘OK, thanks Lorraine,’ said Pete, rolling his eyes. ‘Do you know whose it is?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Look,’ said Pete firmly, redressing the class. ‘It’s one thing to spill your drink on someone’s jacket, it’s another to let it carry on spilling, and another again not to own up to it! Someone in this room knows whose can it is, and I’m going to find out who.’

But at that moment, the school fire alarm went off. It wasn’t unusual for this to happen; fire alarms could go off several times a day and the usual procedure was simply to wait for them to be turned off. The cause was invariably the whim of a passing pupil who, bored with standing outside a classroom, had sought to entertain himself by creating a disturbance. This week, however, as a tactical move to combat this delinquency, staff had been instructed to respond to all fire alarms immediately and congregate in their set places in the yard. The idea was that the culprits would get tired of having to stand outside for long periods at the mercy of the elements and cease their misconduct. The strategy had

Stop Talking

been a resounding failure so far, and the number of fire alarms set off that week had already reached double figures. Staff and pupils alike had started to bring in protective clothing, but regrettably for Pete, he was not one of them.

‘Right, here we go again,’ said Mr. Keaton, donning his wet jacket and grimacing as he felt the juices seep through his shirtsleeve and stick to his skin. ‘You know the routine – leave your belongings here and queue up in the designated Year group area with your tutor. When we return, I’d better have the name of the owner of that can or we’ll still be sitting here in lunchtime.’

With that, Pete ushered them out and went to join his form in the yard beneath his classroom window. When he arrived at his spot, he was pleased to see that his Year 7 tutor group were already in position, albeit a bit rowdily. A thousand school children, contained by a meagre force of about sixty teachers, milled about on the yard and the tennis courts a little further up the slope. It was always potential bedlam, and the sounds of shrieking, shouting, chattering and laughing rose above the assembled masses and carried to the unfortunate households that lined the perimeter. Those at home must have wondered what on earth was going on at the school that week as they witnessed the laborious, time-consuming drill several times a day.

Tom watched the familiar routine with the utmost tedium from a discrete corner of his classroom where he was hiding from the beady, watchful eyes of the Head. He didn’t have a form group because of his duties as a music teacher in assemblies, but he was still expected to vacate the buildings along with everyone else. Tom followed school protocol for the first couple of weeks but then decided that the whole thing was not

only absurd and pointless but also downright miserable in bad weather. Today was sunny, if a little cool, but he still didn't feel like conforming, and besides, they hadn't even bothered to install an alarm in the 1960s 'temporary' music huts, so he could barely hear it going off anyway.

A gang of black-haired Year 11 pupils stood at the top of the bank above the music block, huddled together and whispering conspiratorially. Their uniforms were practically indistinguishable beneath their black garb and adornments, and collectively they gave an appearance that was quite sinister. From his hiding place, Tom spotted the menacing ensemble loitering suspiciously and wondered what was going on. He half suspected they were planning some sort of mischief down in the music block. Just then, the harsh, grating voice of Mr. Smith – the deputy head (the only member of the senior management team who carried any real authority in the school) rose above the cacophony, bellowing at the group to find their forms. All of a sudden, Roy Welland broke through the ranks and marched purposefully across the yard behind the columns of lower-school pupils. By the way that Roy was holding his arm against his body, it looked to Tom as if he were concealing something up the sleeve of his shirt. Then, as Roy approached Mr. Keaton, something long and thin slid out of his sleeve into his good hand. Surely he didn't intend to hit Pete with a damned stick, Tom speculated, in amazement. Even at a place as anarchic as Brentmouth, that sort of aggression would lead to permanent exclusion. It was difficult to see from where Tom was positioned, but it looked as though Roy prodded at the wall of the main building as he passed Mr. Keaton, dropped the implement and hurried on toward the tennis courts.

Pete heard the stick clatter to the ground behind him and turned to see Roy scurrying off to the Year 11 assembly area. It seemed a bit

Stop Talking

incongruous of the notorious delinquent that he should be concerned about being late for anything, even with Mr. Tyler as his tutor, he thought, as he turned back to marking the register. Then, he became aware of a buzzing sound and noticed a wasp settle on the sticky sleeve of his jacket. Pete waved his arm around in an attempt to rid himself of the offending insect but within seconds the air was filled with them. They swarmed around his upper body and head, plunging their tails into every available inch of skin as Pete flailed about in frenzy. Every child within twenty feet of Mr. Keaton fled in horror at the spectacle and several girls were screaming. Pete was shouting and swearing and imploring someone to do something when Mr. Terry, who happened to be passing, started batting them out of the air with his register. This only served to infuriate the wasps more, and consequently, Mr. Terry also fell victim to the attack. Pete tore his jacket off and flung it to the floor, whereupon he stamped on it repeatedly and smacked himself around the head to squash the ones in his hair. In a ridiculous attempt at modesty, he then ran toward the playing fields before ripping his shirt off to free the wasps that had managed to get underneath his right cuff, drawn by the scent of sugar. All the while, Pete's yells were stifled because he was clenching his teeth to stop them crawling into his mouth. The entire savage display was observed by an audience of hundreds, which included Tom, who was still pressed to the window. He felt guilty about not going out to help, but he was over a hundred metres away and the whole episode lasted less than a minute. And, to start with, he genuinely thought that Pete was having a fit.

The enraged swarm around Pete's torso eventually dispersed and allowed him to claw the last of the murderous little stingers out of his hair. He picked up his shirt out of a puddle and put it back on, but it was muddy

and soaking, most of the buttons had pinged off, and it was ripped all the way up the right sleeve. Pete looked up at the legion of spectators on the yard and saw that now there was not a single person within a fifty-metre radius of the disturbed wasps' nest. A tight border of heaving bodies surged back and forth around the clearing as pupils behind them struggled to see what was going on. There was a gap in the crowd where Pete had charged for the fields and through it came the enormous bulk of Mr. Terry. Unlike Pete, he had succeeded in ridding himself of his tiny attackers quite quickly and had suffered only a few stings. It was obvious as soon as he neared the young RE teacher, however, that the poor guy had fared a lot worse. Every exposed inch of skin, from his fingers to the top of his forehead, was covered with dozens of red blotches, and he had handprints and scratches from the wild and frantic thrashing he'd given himself.

'Are you all right?' asked Mr. Terry, delivering the worldwide number one most stupid question following someone quite obviously getting hurt.

Pete's eyes were wide with shock as he slowly came round, breathing heavily, and characteristically of people who've just suffered a traumatic experience in public, he tried to act as if nothing had happened.

'Where's my register?' he asked, trying to conceal his embarrassment by redirecting the focus.

'What?' Mr. Terry replied, unsure he could have heard him correctly.

'I haven't finished taking the register. I dropped it over there somewhere...' said Pete, wandering about in circles.

'Pete, you're not going to take the register – we need to get you to a hospital.'

Stop Talking

‘But what about the register?’ Pete persisted. ‘Someone’s got to do it.’

‘Forget the bloody register, you’ve just been stung by about a hundred wasps. Even if there was a fire, you’re in no fit state to take care of your group. Now let’s get you to a hospital.’

‘John, I don’t need to go to the hospital. I’m fine.’

‘Pete, for God’s sake, you’re covered in stings! You need some antihistamine – as well as a new shirt. Come on, I’m free now. I’ll drive you.’

‘But what about the register, I’ve got...’

‘Pete!’ said Mr. Terry firmly. ‘Shut up about the register. I’ll get someone else to do it if you’re that bothered. Now come on.’

Mr. Terry and Mr. Keaton walked back through the crowd, pupils falling back in awe as they saw the damage the wasps had inflicted on their teacher’s face. The procedure of the drill forgotten, every single soul watched as the two giant teachers, like valiant wounded soldiers, climbed the slope beside the tennis courts and disappeared up toward the car park.

On the opposite side of the school, Tom was still sitting in the music block, contemplating. Now that things had calmed down, he had the opportunity to replay the incident in his head, starting from spying the conniving huddle of Year 11s through to the wasp attack itself. If the two chains of events were connected, as it appeared, Roy, and any number of other pupils, had probably planned the entire thing.

At the sound of the bell for the end of school, Tom promptly locked up and walked swiftly to Pete’s house. The front door was ajar, so Tom knocked out of politeness and made his way through to the living room to find Pete recumbent on the sofa watching TV. His face and neck

were covered in red spots, but there was only mild inflammation, and it looked more like a bad case of measles.

‘You OK?’ Tom asked.

‘Yeah,’ Pete replied sombrely.

‘You sure? It looks quite painful.’

‘To be honest, I’m more embarrassed than anything – running round screaming like a banshee and beating myself around the head. Not really what you want viewed by millions of people.’

‘Well, you know if it had happened to anyone else, they would have reacted the same way.’

‘Yeah, but it didn’t happen to anyone else.’

‘Fair enough. Anyway, you’re OK. I just wanted to check you hadn’t had an allergic reaction or anything...’

‘No mate, I’m fine.’

‘...and to say that I think it might have been deliberate.’

‘What?’ asked Pete, sitting up. ‘What do you mean?’

Tom sat down on an armchair and looked intently at his friend. ‘I saw Roy with a group of Year 11s standing up the slope from the music department, looking suspicious. I thought it might have something to do with me at first, and then Roy started walking behind the tutor groups toward the tennis courts. It looked as if he were hiding something up his sleeve, judging by the stiffness of his arm, and then when he got up behind you, he pulled out a stick and shoved it in the wall, which...’

‘I knew it was him who dropped it!’ Pete exclaimed. ‘I heard something fall to the ground behind me and saw him walk off, but I had no idea what he was doing.’

‘So I presume that’s where the wasps’ nest was, then?’

Stop Talking

‘It was in a hole in the wall, apparently. John Terry told me there were some loose bricks at the base, and they’d formed the nest in a cavity beyond. He got stung a few times as well, actually.’

Pete paused, replaying the scene in his head. ‘The total and utter shit...’

Tom eased back in his chair, crossed his legs and waited for the news to sink in.

‘What a nasty little...’ said Pete, stunned that someone would do such a thing to him. ‘I mean, I know he wrote that stupid note to you and everything, but I really thought he was incapable of actually doing anyone any harm.’

Pete scratched his right arm, and it was then that Tom noticed the multitude of lesions all the way up to his shoulder.

‘How come you’ve got so many stings up there?’ he asked, pointing.

‘Some little git spilt some pop on my jacket prior to the fire alarm,’ said Pete, the recollection maddening him further. ‘The wasps must have been attracted by the smell or something. Did they find out who set it off?’

‘No, but I bet I know who it was.’

‘You think Roy did that as well?’ asked Pete, looking doubtful.

‘Yep,’ Tom replied, nodding meaningfully.

Pete gasped. ‘You think he set it off because he knew I would be lining up next to the wasps’ nest?’

‘Well, it’s not as if we don’t have enough fire drills not to be familiar where everyone stands, is it? I reckon I could have told you where

each form goes after the first two weeks. That alarm today must be at least the tenth one this week.'

'Well, bugger me!' said Pete in disbelief. 'I could see why he had it in for you but...' he trailed off.

'You were right there with me,' Tom reminded him, 'and it was you who started it if you recall.'

'Yeah, I know but...'

'Someone who was there on Friday night probably told him you were part of it earlier this week, and he didn't want to be seen to be giving me special treatment.'

Pete just sat there, shocked and dumbstruck at the callous and calculated nature of the act.

'Look,' said Tom finally, in an attempt to assuage the feeling of victimisation Pete must be feeling. 'I'm sure that if I had a tutor group that lined up next to a wasps' nest, it would have been me who ended up in casualty. And, of course,' he added without conviction, 'there's a chance I could be wrong.'

'Well you may be wrong about the alarm, but I'm sure he intended to provoke the wasps into an attack, even if it wasn't specifically me he was targeting.'

The pair of them sat there for a minute, Pete digesting the information he'd received, and Tom cogitating the implications of the incident for him.

'Has anyone said anything to you about Friday yet?' asked Pete.

'Who? Pupils?'

'Yeah. Why, has anyone else said anything?'

Stop Talking

‘No, no one. Oh,’ said Tom, suddenly remembering, ‘some older kid I didn’t recognise shouted something, mostly indecipherable, about punching someone from across the yard, but apart from that – nothing. I only teach a small group of nerdy Year 11s, don’t forget. They probably don’t exactly have their fingers on the pulse with the gossip at the school, and they definitely wouldn’t have been in the club.’

Pete swung his legs back on the sofa and rested his head in his arms. ‘I’m not going to let him get away with it, you know.’

‘OK,’ said Tom tentatively. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘Don’t know yet,’ Pete replied, examining the puncture wounds on his arm. ‘I know if I divulge any of the background on Roy there would probably be repercussions for us both, and possibly Jim, so trying to get him expelled is out.’ He paused thoughtfully. ‘It’ll have to be something covert...’

‘Like what?’

‘Don’t know,’ said Pete, his expression impassive. ‘But when I think of something, you’ll be the first to know.’

Another Nail in the Coffin

It was night time. Tom unlocked the door to his classroom and there, on the floor, was another note. It was written in bold, black felt tip and the perpetrator had again used a stencil. It read, “*YOU’RE A TIME BOMB WAI...*” But before he could finish, Tom was distracted by a movement out of the corner of his eye. A figure was running up the steep bank toward the woods. Tom dropped his case and sprinted after him. The trail was barely visible in the soft moonlight and disappeared completely when he passed under the thick canopy of trees. He could just make out a dark shape up ahead slithering about on the muddy path and crashing into overhanging branches. Tom felt a surge of adrenaline as he gained ground. He was going to catch this nasty piece of work, and when he did, he fully intended to exact his revenge. Tom focussed on the fleeing form. A long black cape billowed out from a clasp at the neck, and a hood obscured its face. The menacing ensemble reminded Tom of a *Nazgul* from *The Lord of the Rings*. As the creature glanced backwards at its pursuer, it clipped the trunk of a silver birch and

Stop Talking

stumbled into a bush. Realising the game was up, the note-deliverer stopped and turned. Tom slowed as he approached.

‘Did you write that note?’ Tom gasped, his breath coming in quick, painful shudders.

‘Yes, why?’ The voice was metallic and evil and untrammelled by even the tiniest shortness of breath. Beneath the hood, the creature’s features were swathed in an inky shadow.

‘What did you do that for?’

‘I want to kill you.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I enjoy killing.’

‘Why not kill someone else then?’

‘Because I want to kill *you*.’

Tom grew angrier and stepped forward threateningly. The figure screeched and spread its cape like batman.

‘Come here, you deranged, fantasy game-book creature,’ Tom growled. ‘Let’s see who you are.’

Tom reached forward and yanked the hood back to reveal Roy’s face, twisted in a grinning snarl. At the end of his ruined right hand, three curved talons swung toward Tom’s face. Tom failed to react in time and the talons ripped through the flesh of his left cheek, reopening his scar and sending a jet of blood over Roy’s cape. Tom swung back but his movements were agonisingly slow, as if he had been plunged suddenly into a swimming pool. The blow failed to land and Roy’s claw struck Tom again, sending him reeling onto his back. Tom rose to his hands and knees and tried to crawl away, but he already knew the sequence of events from here. He was no longer in the woods. His attacker was no longer Roy

Welland. He was in a tiny cellar. It was dark and cold and Tom had been there for what seemed an eternity. The person had no name or face, but he knew it was a woman. Then the drilling began. Right in the middle of his back, the woman silently drilled a hole with a rod. The pain was slight at first and then gradually intensified. Tom writhed and contorted as the pain in his back seared up his spine. Just before he could bear it no longer, the woman whispered in his ear. Tom could never make out the words, but he knew they explained that the torture was deserved and for his own good. He screamed.

The grey light of early dawn seeped through the curtains of Tom's bedroom window as he jerked awake. His body was stretched out and twisted, and his fingers were hooked like claws around the sheets. He relaxed, exhaled a long breath and rolled onto his back, staring as an errant shaft of light caught the dust floating above his bed. He often wondered if he did actually scream as he was torn from the grips of this familiar nightmare. No one had ever mentioned it if he had, and Tom had not had a recurrence for a while. He had violent dreams all the time, and the seeds from which they sprung were eclectic, but they never seemed to hurt him in the same way. He could be stabbed or machine-gunned, burned or pulverised, and it really didn't bother him, but if the cellar hove into view, Tom knew he was dreaming and, with cold dread, what was coming. There was nothing he could do about it. He would feel the pain as if it were really happening, and the torture would continue until the words were spoken and he woke up.

Tom lay on his bed for a while and tried to get back to sleep, but as the tip of the sun broke the horizon, the seagulls awakened and plunged into their usual ear-rending morning chorus. Tom swore and threw back

Stop Talking

the duvet. There was no way he'd get back to sleep now. He splashed some cold water on his face and pulled on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. He might as well do some exercise than lie there, frustrated.

Tom jogged down the deserted high street to the pier where he turned right and followed the sea wall. Gulls scattered before him on the boardwalk, squawking their indignation at the early morning disturbance. About half a mile further on, the beach rose gradually out of the water to form a wide stretch of reddish sand. Tom ran down the steps that were cut into the side of the wall and across the damp, harder sand by the tidemark. Behind him, a trail of glassy footprints vanished as the water lapped the shore and smothered them. Tom slowed and stopped for a moment to look out to sea. He always found it the most diminishing of activities. It diminished the importance of quotidian living. It diminished the measure of all those who sought to bring you down. It diminished all of your petty worries and concerns into a tiny bundle and dropped it into the furthest, most secure recess of your mind. Above all, it diminished one's sense of self as the concept of the colossal weight, depth and size of the ocean crushed it into insignificance. At the same time, the blue expanse spread seductively before him like an invitation to far-off exotic lands and gave a wonderful feeling of liberation.

Tom placed his hands on his head and traced the faint curvature of the earth with his eye. A vast golden mist rose up from the horizon as the first dawn rays touched and warmed his skin. A huge, brooding oil tanker sat about a mile out to sea, sunlight glinting off its bow and sparkling on the tips of the surrounding white horses. The sound of the waves washed through his head and cleansed it, purifying his soul. The stinging in his eyes and grogginess from lack of sleep had gone, and Tom felt refreshed

and invigorated. Running was fantastic, he thought. It was amazing how one could go from feeling dead to feeling so alive just by exercising a little bit of self-discipline and running for half an hour.

The climb back up the hill to his flat hurt Tom just enough to be pleasant, and he immediately took a cold shower when he got back. Even by the time he'd dressed and eaten breakfast it was still only six o' clock, so Tom turned the telly on and thought about the day ahead. He had a free first thing, which was always a nice way to start the day, and then two periods of Year 7. Teaching this year group was the best part of his job at the moment, but Tom, along with all the other teachers at Brentmouth, could already see the demise beginning. This week, Tom had told off a boy whom he'd heard talking as instructions were being given out. The lad protested that it wasn't just him; his friend was also talking. Tom replied that it didn't matter what anyone else was doing; he was the one who'd been caught. The lad had said that was unfair and fell into a sulk for the rest of the lesson. It did not matter whether he was telling the truth. A boy who would not have challenged Mr. Langston at the start of term now felt empowered to do so. As Tom had not experienced any problems so far with this year group, he could only assume that the degeneration was the result of disruption in other lessons and observance of staff authority being flouted by older pupils at break and lunchtimes.

Tom planned the morning in his head and then turned his attention with ambivalence to the afternoon of Year 8. By half past one on a Friday afternoon, the weekend was just two hours away, but what lay ahead were the worst two lessons on Tom's timetable. Partly because he was so consumed by occupying Shaun Bratcher, and partly because he was always so exhausted by this point in the week, Tom had been neglecting

Stop Talking

other increasingly difficult members of 8X4. Half of the class was on the special educational needs register, and, as if that were not enough, half of these also had emotional and behavioural difficulties. Since the Bratcher episode, Tom had taught both lower-stream Year 8 groups twice without serious incident, but he knew it was only a matter of time before something kicked off again.

•

Period 4 was difficult. Not unmanageable, but difficult. Difficult, draining and dispiriting. Tom saw Julian coming out of his hut across the path as he dismissed his class, and he nodded comradely at his HoD.

‘All right?’ Mr. Hart responded glumly.

‘Yeah. They didn’t learn much, but they didn’t break anything.’

‘Good.’

‘You all right?’

‘I suppose so. As much as you ever can be at this place.’

‘You just had a bad lesson?’

‘Awful, mate, awful.’

‘Well only an hour ‘til the weekend,’ Tom replied, spreading his arms and shrugging.

Whenever Tom was feeling down about his job, he only had to think about Julian. His HoD was going from bad to worse as the term progressed, and when you’re ten years into the profession, that’s not a good sign.

8X4 pupils began to mingle at the foot of the steps that led up to his hut. Tom looked at them and wondered if they were aware of the

Another Nail in the Coffin

misery they caused. No, he thought to himself, children did not even see teachers as human beings – how could they know what damage they do? One hour to go, one hour to go.

‘What we doing today, sir?’ a pupil piped up.

‘Writing an essay about Mozart,’ Tom teased, hearing laughter from Julian across the way.

‘Oh, no!’ the girl cried. ‘Oh sir, can’t we play on instruments?’

‘Nope.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because they all got broken in last week’s lesson.’

‘Oh.’

Several instruments were indeed broken in the lesson. The skin on a hand drum had been punctured, a maraca had split and the seeds removed, a number of beaters had had their heads pulled off, a pair of headphones had been stripped, and so on and so on. Not to mention all the bits and pieces that had been stolen. Tom was joking about the essay, but he did intend to threaten the group with writing all lesson if they continued to mistreat the equipment. In addition, Tom was determined not to let them in until he had order and quiet from everybody.

‘Who are we waiting for?’ Mr. Langston asked, noticing that the queue was unusually short.

‘Shaun’s in the woods, sir,’ a pupil answered.

‘And Aaron.’

‘And Ryan.’

‘Really,’ said Mr. Langston, shutting the door and striding up the path. ‘Wait here.’

Stop Talking

Tom could hear shouting coming from the woods but could not see anyone.

‘You have five seconds to get in line, lads, or there’ll be trouble,’ Mr. Langston called.

Laughter followed and then Ryan and Aaron came crashing through the undergrowth.

‘Shaun’s up a tree, sir!’ Aaron shouted, as he careered down the slope.

‘Which one?’

‘That one!’ Aaron replied, pointing at a massive old oak about twenty feet into the woods. Sure enough, about a third of the way up the trunk, Shaun was sitting with his legs astride a thick branch.

‘Shaun!’ Mr. Langston called up at him.

‘What?’

‘Shaun, what are you doing?’

‘Climbing a tree – what does it look like?’

‘It looks like you are climbing a tree,’ Tom agreed, realising the stupidity of the question. ‘Now get down.’

‘No.’

‘OK. How long do you intend to stay up there?’

‘Dunno.’

‘Fine. Stay there then.’

Mr. Langston strode back down the slope, hoping that Shaun would get bored fairly quickly and come down of his own accord. He reached the path, slowed and looked around. The line had disappeared and there was not a sign of a pupil anywhere. Here we go, Tom thought, playtime. Knowing that to look for them was exactly what they wanted,

Mr. Langston went into his classroom and sat at his desk. He placed a bet with himself that, without doing a thing, he would have the whole class, including Shaun, inside and in their seats within three minutes. He checked his watch: 2.28. Assuming that at least one of them would be watching, Tom pretended to mark the register to give the impression that he wasn't bothered by, or interested in, their silly little game.

Mr. Langston checked his watch. Three minutes had passed. Sighing, he surreptitiously flicked a glance through the windows on either side of his room, expecting to catch one of the little toe-rags peering in at him. Not a bowl haircut to be seen. Mr. Langston sighed again. So much for the bet, he thought. Determined not to give in, however, he continued to sit there, drawing faces on his register.

Mr. Hart stuck his head around the door. 'You do know your class is outside playing football?'

Mr. Langston looked up. 'No?! Little bastards!' he exclaimed, incredulously.

Tom stood up and marched out of his room and down toward the playing field. He stopped at the top of a steep bank that overlooked the field and saw the male contingent of his class kicking a football about while the girls lay sunbathing on the bank with their skirts and sleeves pulled up. The most amazing thing about it, Tom thought, as he surveyed the scene, was that the principal source of fun was not the naughtiness but the activities themselves. Mr. Langston stood there with his hands on his hips, unnoticed. They weren't even on the lookout for him, he realised, shaking his head in disbelief.

'Oi! What the hell do you think you're doing?!' shouted Mr. Langston, immediately realising he'd just made the same mistake twice.

Stop Talking

‘Playing football!’ cried the familiar voice of Shaun Bratcher out of an arrowhead of bodies chasing the ball. ‘What does it look like?!’

‘All of you get in line now!’ Mr. Langston bellowed. He waited a few seconds but no one reacted. ‘The last one in the queue cleans the chewing gum off the floor at the end of the day,’ he added.

That worked. As soon as the first one started running, they all joined in. It became yet another game – this time to see who was the fastest. Maybe everything should be dressed up as a game, Tom surmised. Taking the register in under thirty seconds. Quickest group to complete a task. Whatever. As long as there was competition, there was a reason for doing it. Only one pupil walked toward the hut. The bellicose figure of Shaun Bratcher nonchalantly made its way up the bank. He looked defiantly at Mr. Langston as he passed, challenging him to carry out his threat. What’s wrong with the little brat now? Tom wondered. Last week, he’d been comparatively well behaved and had even offered to help him pack up. The minute you think you’re winning with these kids, they urinate on you again. So damned fickle.

‘Shaun, come here,’ said Mr. Langston, the exasperation audible.

‘What now?’ Shaun moaned wretchedly, as if Mr. Langston were his life-long persecutor.

‘What’s wrong with you today?’

‘Nothing.’

‘There is – you’re obviously upset about something.’

‘No, I’m not.’

‘Well if you don’t tell me before the end of the lesson, you will stay behind.’

‘I won’t.’

Another Nail in the Coffin

‘Whatever. We’ll deal with it then.’ Mr. Langston walked up the steps of the hut. ‘Single file, facing the front, no talking!’ he barked.

Pupils shuffled around, pushing each other to get in line.

‘Whichever queue is the best goes in first,’ said Mr. Langston, the competition theme in mind. Two reasonably straight, but noisy queues formed outside the hut.

‘Whichever queue is the *quietest* goes in first.’

Everyone started telling each other to shut up until both lines were shouting at the tops of their lungs. Through the windows of Mr. Hart’s hut, faces full of curiosity piled up on top of each other. Knowing there was no chance that Mr. Hart would come out and interfere, Mr. Langston just waited patiently for it to die down with a look of condescending amusement on his face. In the end, the girls realised that to concentrate on not saying anything at all was going to be more effective and got to lead in first. The boys, angered by their defeat, started swearing at each other and name-calling.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Mr. Langston reassuringly. ‘You can beat the girls at chanting when we’re inside. Now go in.’

By the time Mr. Langston entered the classroom, mayhem was breaking out. Ryan had stolen someone’s yo-yo and was using it to hit people. Aaron was sitting on a girl’s lap, claiming that it was his seat and she’d better fucking move or he was going to batter her. A little bespectacled girl was bunched up on the floor beside a wall cabinet with a glockenspiel on top of her. The keys decorated her clothes as tears ran down her snotty red nose and misted her glasses. Shaun had a wrist-load of elastic bands and was proceeding to flick girls’ bare legs as he leapt over desks and chairs. In response, they had opened bottles of pop, shaken them

Stop Talking

up and sprayed fizz over him. Only five pupils were sitting down, their heads resting glumly on their arms as they waited for the injured bedlam to end.

Knowing that to avoid serious injury he had to take charge of the situation quickly, Mr. Langston summoned all of his remaining energy and screamed at his class to get in their seats. The words tore up his throat and ricocheted around the four walls, buffeting the eardrums of his pupils with sheer volume. The class was taken aback by the jagged rawness of his tone, and the riot subsided. One-by-one, they all found a place to sit, but as they lowered themselves into their chairs, snide remarks and insults passed in muttered spurts across the room.

One of the first things Tom was taught in his practice was that if you waited long enough, any class would eventually be quiet. Despite the improvidence of the previous bet, Mr. Langston made another that he would have quiet within a minute. Although the principle hadn't worked in London, he believed it should work out here with the sleepy pace of the country, and he was weary from the battle with his period 4 class.

Mr. Langston watched with glazed fascination as pupils engaged with each other in little flurries of insults. It was like a game of vernacular tennis in which each vulgar exchange was a rally. Mr. Langston waited stoically for the onslaughts to end, but just when he thought the group had had enough, someone else would start up again.

'What you looking at, you homo?'

'You, you little prick.'

'Oh yeah? You want to have a go? I'll batter you.'

'Yeah – course you would, you twat.'

'Dickhead.'

Another Nail in the Coffin

‘Your mum.’

‘Oh yeah? Sir, he’s calling my mum a slag!’

‘She is though. I gave it to her last night. And she’s fat.’

‘Not as fat as your sister! At least that’s what the tramp at the bus stop said.’

‘Not as fat as your nan. At least that’s what half the tramps in Brentmouth said.’

‘Your dad’s one of them.’

‘Your dad’s gay. Both of them.’ This stumped the other boy for a second.

‘You saying I’ve got two gay dads?!’

‘Yeah.’

‘Who’s my mum then?’

‘You haven’t got a mum.’

‘You have. She’s locked up with the other dogs at the kennels.’

‘You saying my mum’s a dog?’

‘A gay fat one.’

‘Arse bandit.’

‘Turd burglar.’

Mr. Langston observed the proceedings with mild interest in who would emerge the victor. He was tired and the conversation was so utterly ridiculous, he couldn’t be bothered to put a stop to it. Besides, he thought, the image of two sweating fat blokes mating with each other to spawn any of these degenerate beast-children seemed vaguely fitting.

Mr. Langston waited for several minutes, but still the bickering continued. He decided to abandon the waiting game – it obviously didn’t apply to Brentmouth pupils either – but at that moment, Shaun, who had

Stop Talking

been sitting at the back, sulking and balancing on two legs of his chair to elicit some sort of rebuke, suddenly leant forward with a thud.

‘Aren’t you gonna *do* something?’ he asked with a sneer. ‘Can’t you do your job or something?’

Mr. Langston choked. So now, Shaun, clearly uncertain about how best to be a pain in the arse in this new environment, had come up with the self-righteous, woe-begotten pupil! The boy was a genius!

‘All right, be quiet,’ said Mr. Langston, his mouth suddenly dry with guilt. ‘Don’t want to disrupt Shaun’s learning anymore, do we? We all know what a conscientious academic he is.’

‘Prick,’ the first boy continued.

‘Penis.’

‘Oh, for God’s sake, shut up!’ Mr. Langston shouted. ‘It’s like watching an episode of Jerry Springer, only nowhere near as much fun.’ This was greeted with amusement from 8X4. Good, Tom thought, remember: competition and laughter – two weapons with which to fight.

‘Now listen, I don’t make you do a lot of writing because the simple fact is, it’s far better to have information in your head. If someone asks you your name and you have to look it up, you’ve got problems.’

8X4 laughed again. Excellent, Tom thought. He was doing well, but he knew he had about thirty seconds to get them doing something before they started insulting each other again.

‘Now, all of you stand up and breathe deeply,’ he instructed.

8X4 scraped their chairs backwards along the PVC-tiled floor as they rose to their feet. Unfortunately, some of the pupils couldn’t handle the excitement of standing up and overdid it by deliberately hyperventilating.

Another Nail in the Coffin

‘No, that’s not breathing is it? That’s what you do when there’s something wrong with you.’

More laughter. Tom realised that he was, at last, getting it. On every level, keep it very simple.

Mr. Langston quickly drew a stave on the board, a treble clef and then five notes on the lines.

‘By the end of this lesson, everyone in this room is going to be able to read music. This is the first step. Repeat after me: Every Green Bus Drives Fast.’

‘Every Green Bus Drives Fast,’ the class reiterated.

‘Sorry – what did you say?’

‘Every Green Bus Drives Fast,’ they repeated, as if Mr. Langston hadn’t heard them the first time.

‘Sorry – what did you say? Speak up!’ Mr. Langston smiled as a way of giving consent. They started to get the idea and a few of the boys got excited.

‘EVERY GREEN BUS DRIVES FAST!’ they roared, grinning at each other. This was fun. They never usually got permission to scream their heads off in lessons.

‘No – I’m still not getting it,’ Mr. Langston said, wincing in anticipation.

‘*EVERY GREEN BUS DRIVES FAST!*’ everybody screamed protractedly, veins bulging out from their foreheads with effort.

Mr. Langston chuckled. Despite the inherent value of repeating the mnemonic, there was no doubt in his mind that the best thing about this exercise was that for the first time, every pupil in the class, with the possible exception of Shaun, was a hundred per cent engaged.

Stop Talking

‘OK, I got it that time. Now sit down. In pairs, I want you to come up with an alternative phrase to the one you just learnt. Each word must begin with the same letter, so an example might be Every Good Boy Deserves Football. You have two minutes. Go!’

He watched as they paired up. There was one pupil left over who had no one to work with, so Mr. Langston looked around the room for a partner. There, at the back, Shaun had returned to swinging back and forth in his chair, bouncing the pliable plastic back rhythmically against the wall. He had made no effort to find anyone to work with and looked to be in an absolutely foul mood. His jaw was set, his complexion was an ugly shade of crimson, and his eyes were burning. Mr. Langston knew that he would be in for a battle if he put him with the tiny bespectacled girl with halitosis, but he had no choice.

‘Shaun, you go with Betsan.’

‘No way, I’m not going with her – she stinks.’

‘Be careful, Shaun, you are treading a very fine line as it is. Now unless you’d rather go with me...’

Shaun looked ready to murder the unkempt little Year 8 girl as she shuffled timidly toward him. Shaun folded his arms and steadfastly turned his head away. Betsan sat down on the furthest edge of her seat from Shaun and looked beseechingly at Mr. Langston for support.

‘Shaun, if you don’t talk to her I’m going to come over there and sit on the other side of you.’

‘No, you’re not! God’s sake! This school’s so lame. What are we supposed to do anyway?’

Betsan proceeded to explain in a nervous, faltering voice. Tom left them to it and looked around the room. So far, so good. Every pupil

Another Nail in the Coffin

seemed focussed on the activity, and no one had felt the need to leave their seat and hide under the tables, or anything.

‘OK,’ Mr. Langston interrupted after the designated two minutes.

‘What have we got? Ryan, let’s have yours.’

‘We ain’t got nothing, sir.’

‘What about the first word beginning with E? Anything?’

‘No.’

‘OK, Aaron – what have you got?’

‘I ain’t got nothing either, sir.’

‘Right.’ Mr. Langston’s heart sank a little. ‘Put your hand up if you’ve got anything.’ He glanced around the room at a mass of blank faces. No one raised a hand.

‘Has anyone got just one word beginning with E, G, B, D or F?’

Apart from a few frowns, the expressions remained blank.

‘No one?’ Mr. Langston persisted with the sort of tireless, dogged determination that all teachers swiftly learn is integral to the job. ‘OK. Fran – think of a word that begins with E.’

Fran shifted uncomfortably in her seat. She never answered questions and hated being picked on. When she heard her name mentioned, she froze with fear and failed to hear the rest of the sentence. She gawped up at the intimidating figure of her teacher, begging for an earthquake to swallow her up.

‘It *is* Fran, isn’t it?’ Mr. Langston asked, afraid he’d got her name wrong. The girl opened her mouth but nothing came out. Mr. Langston could hear pupils getting restless in the background.

Stop Talking

‘OK,’ he said, turning back to the class and deciding to cut his losses. ‘Put your hand up if you can think of any word, any word at all, that begins with E.’

‘F,’ someone called. A lone child snickered in response.

‘Are you joking?’ Mr. Langston asked in pained tones.

‘Sounds like it begins with e.’

‘Well it doesn’t, and anyway, that’s not a word is it?’

‘Eat,’ someone called out.

‘Put your hand up.’

A girl put her hand up. ‘Eat,’ she repeated.

‘Nyssa, no. You put your hand up, wait to be asked to speak, *then* speak,’ Mr. Langston replied, diligently and laboriously reinforcing the rules.

Nyssa huffed and stuck her hand up. Mr. Langston looked around the room as if he hadn’t seen her.

‘Oh, Nyssa!’ Mr. Langston exclaimed theatrically, as his eyes finally alighted on her. ‘You have your hand up – you must want to say something!’

Nyssa groaned, but she smiled at her teacher’s antics. ‘Eat.’

‘Well done. Now, can anyone think of a word beginning with G?’

A hand went up.

‘Yes?’

‘Jelly.’

‘Jelly begins with a j!’ Mr. Langston shouted. He didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. ‘Just think of the gu sound – as in gut.’

‘Gorilla.’

‘Like your mum,’ a pupil ventured to his partner.

Another Nail in the Coffin

‘Noooo!’ Tom groaned. ‘Not like his mum. And not like his either before you start!’ he said, turning toward the recipient of the comment. ‘Right, so we’ve got Eat Gorilla. Doesn’t make any sense yet, but never mind. What about B?’

‘Bomb,’ Shaun’s voice came from the back.

A silence followed. Tom’s stomach tightened and his brain pulsed. He stared at Shaun, daring himself to make a connection between the suggestion and Roy’s picture.

‘Why did you say bomb?’ he said, when he found his voice.

‘Because it begins with b.’

‘How does that follow on from eat gorilla?’

‘How does gorilla follow on from eat?’

Shaun gazed at Mr. Langston, his characteristic audacity returning and the familiar sardonic, lop-sided smirk creeping up one side of his face.

‘We’re not having bomb,’ said Mr. Langston after a long pause. ‘Anyone got any other suggestions?’

‘Big.’

‘OK... Eat Gorilla Big...’ Mr. Langston sighed. ‘Eat Gorilla Big – not quite the sort of thing I had in mind, but whatever works. D?’

Another hand went up.

‘Yes?’

‘Dead.’

‘Dead?’ Mr. Langston thought momentarily about vetoing dead but knew the mnemonic was already doomed.

‘OK. Eat Gorilla Big Dead. What about f?’

‘Phil – as in Phil the fatso.’

‘You’re the fatso, you fat jabber,’ Phil responded aggressively.

Stop Talking

‘Fat jabber?’ the lad ventured.

‘We’re not having fat jabber or Phil,’ Mr. Langston answered in a tired monotone.

‘Why not?’

‘Because... why am I answering this... Phil doesn’t begin with f, it begins with p-h. You could have fatso... well, you could, but we’re not having it.’

‘Why not?’ Aaron asked.

‘Because it’s not exactly PC.’

‘So? What’s that? I’ll remember it if we do.’

‘Um...’ Mr. Langston briefly checked the room for fatsos before he gave in. Phil *was* a bit fat, he noticed, but to hell with it – if it meant they would remember the phrase... ‘All right, Eat Gorilla Big Dead Fatso. Right, stand up, and say it after me. Eat Gorilla Big Dead Fatso.’

‘Eat Gorilla Big Dead Fatso.’

‘No,’ Mr. Langston replied and shook his head – half to lure them into shouting again and half because he couldn’t believe the depths to which his standards had fallen. ‘I can’t hear you.’

‘EAT GORILLA BIG DEAD FATSO.’

‘What?’

‘EAT GORILLA BIG DEAD FATSO! EAT GORILLA BIG DEAD FATSO! EAT GORILLA BIG DEAD FATSO! EAT GORILLA BIG DEAD FATSO!’

As the children chanted at the tops of their voices, Mr. Langston leant contentedly against the whiteboard, hands in his pockets, smiling broadly despite himself. The whole class, with the exception of Shaun who was still sitting moodily in the corner, was indulging itself whole-heartedly

in this high-octane activity. Kids were banging on desks with the rhythm of the words. Others were dancing, expressions of pure glee lighting up their grimy little faces. Some even had their hands in the air. It was then Tom noticed that, with the chanting still in full swing, all eyes had turned to the door. He followed their gaze. There, in the doorway, stood the rotund figure of Miss Clarke, wearing a look of utter disbelief and horror. An official-looking suited fellow stood behind her right shoulder. The poor bloke looked as if he were trying to contain a lung full of helium as he struggled against the urge to react to the hilarious inopportunities of the moment.

‘This is the Chief Education Advisor for Devon, Mr. Langston,’ said Miss Clarke, with a face like thunder.

‘Sorry?’ Mr. Langston called, unable to hear anything above the din.

Hilary strode over to him.

‘I shall be observing this lesson next week, Mr. Langston,’ she seethed through tight lips, her words clipped and brimming with distaste. ‘I expect a detailed lesson plan in my pigeon hole by Thursday.’

With that, she turned heel and marched out. The inspector smiled awkwardly, nodded and retreated.

Mr. Langston motioned for his class to stop and sat down heavily in his chair. He took in a deep breath and exhaled. With that breath, yet another bit of care, another bit of perspective, another bit of sanity, drifted away to be sucked into the malign walls of Brentmouth School.

Escape from Reality

At seven o'clock on Saturday morning, a large, grey-white seagull settled on the window ledge outside Tom's bedroom. It was tired from wheeling around the roofs of the buildings at the top of the hill and combating the sudden gusts of wind blowing in from the weltering English Channel. Wispy grey clouds scurried across an otherwise perfectly white, matt sky. For the first time that autumn, the temperature had dropped low enough for even the most tenacious shorts enthusiasts to succumb and wear jeans.

One beady, black eyeball of the seagull found a gap in the curtains and fixed a hooded glare on the fully clothed figure that sprawled prone across the bed. The gull cocked its head inquisitively, uncertain of the nature of the form it observed. Just then, a sudden blast ruffled its feathers and caused the bird to lose its footing on the ledge. Long, scaly claws scrabbled at the flaking paintwork and an indignant screech erupted from its throat. The raucous protestation drove through Tom's head like an icy spear and yanked him out of the analgesic comfort of sleep. He felt the dull pain of the hangover immediately and fought to sink back down into

the swampy embrace of unconsciousness. Tom's poisoned brains weighed like a viscous yolk on the brittle shell of his skull as he lay unmoving on top of the duvet. The welcome arms of the elusive dream gradually retreated, and Tom sighed irritably. He lifted his eyelids a fraction and daylight stung his eyes as though he had sand in them. He swung his legs slowly over the side of the bed and sat up. The yolk rolled like a water balloon and waves of pain pulsed around his cranium. A feeling of acute despair seeped through his body, and Tom sat there with his head in his hands for several minutes. Finally, anger at the rude awakening and the instant recollection of yesterday's misfortune shot through the hopelessness, and Tom stood up forcefully. The yolk jumped and almost made him black out. Disoriented, Tom lost his balance, fell back onto the bed and hit his head against the headboard. This sent him over the edge. He leapt up and punched the partition wall of the bathroom, causing the thin plaster to crumble and leave an imprint. Unsatisfied, Tom then kicked the door with his unprotected right foot and fresh pain coursed up his leg. The seagull on the window ledge squawked at the commotion coming from inside the room, and Tom threw a pillow toward it with such force that one of the panes cracked. Deciding that its precarious perch had become too dangerous, the gull gave one final cry of annoyance, spread its wings, and disappeared. Tom's violent catharsis slowly assuaged his fury, and he expended the last throes swearing and raining blows on the mattress.

Somewhat satiated, Tom shuffled into the bathroom and began mechanically the usual morning ablutions. He could feel the blood in his eyes and the puffiness around them so avoided his reflection in the mirror – no need to compound his sobriety by looking at the toxin's ravages. The

Stop Talking

toothbrush knocked against the back of his throat with his indiscriminate strokes, and his stomach heaved. Tom stood absolutely still, willing the nausea to pass, but it caught hold and he crumpled to his knees over the basin, dry-retching silently. With each uncontrollable violent spasm, his body wracked and contorted and a venomous palpitation surged against his skull with such ferocity that tears seeped from the corners of his eyes. When his stomach finally stilled, Tom rose unsteadily and splashed cold water on his face. Then he stood for a good minute, hands resting on the basin for support, taking deep breaths to compose himself.

Feeling shaken but stable, Tom dressed and wandered into the living room. He'd forgotten to draw the curtains in here, but the room was still gloomy with the overcast sky. The ill-fitting sash windows rattled with every fresh gust of wind, and an intermittent wailing drifted through the neglected Victorian building. Tom stood despondently in the doorway of the room and gazed vacantly at pedestrians as they passed on the street, their shoulders hunched in an attempt to shield their cheeks against the cold flurries. He often found that, during the course of one of these trances, he would suddenly become sentient and have very little idea how long he had been out of it. Apart from the fact that he had been thinking about something in great earnest, it was as though he had fallen asleep standing up and awoken instantaneously.

Tom knew people regarded him as absent-minded, and he supposed they were right, in a way. That just meant that he lacked presence of mind though; his mind was not absent of thoughts. In fact, a profusion of thoughts plagued his private moments endlessly. Some, as in the case of the first to preoccupy Tom's poisoned brain that morning, were as trivial as the four triangles created by a bluebottle relative to the corners

of the window pane. Others, such as the one that immediately followed, were broader in scope and had to do with the infinite space beyond that fat, refulgent little fly. Sometimes he thought about recent events, such as his lesson the previous day, and at other times, events dragged up from the depths of his memory. Whenever his restless mind took him back to these earliest memories – those from the end of his early childhood – it seemed as if they all materialised at once. Where the memories should have started to fade into indistinct, patchy images, a sudden opaque emptiness rose like a black wall before him. Tom hated that his mind would not let him stop thinking so much. It certainly rarely seemed to do him any good, and recently, the seclusive activity had become more and more of an obsession.

Tom came round to find that he was staring at the telephone boxes on the other side of the road and had not moved from the doorway. He shook his head vigorously to snap out of it, forgetting the size of his hangover, and the yolk bounced from side to side with an effect similar to a series of cerebral electric shocks. He moved gingerly to the fridge and opened the door. He found a tub of butter, a lump of mouldy cheese, a can of processed peas and half a bottle of Scrumpy Jack. Envisaging a round of cheese on toast for breakfast, Tom opened the cupboard in search of bread. To his dismay, he discovered that it had turned blue with saprophytic fungi, and the sight of it threatened to turn his tortured stomach again. Tom stood still once more, waiting for the nausea to pass, this time with success. Suddenly, however, the thought of food was very unappealing and the hopeless feeling returned. He looked again at the bottle of cider and therein saw a way out of his misery. Within that bottle resided an escape from the physical torment, the incessant and depressing stream of thoughts

Stop Talking

and the stress of his insidious job that hung like a dark, foreboding cloud above his head. Before any opposing thoughts could interfere, Tom grabbed the bottle by the neck and took several long gulps. He then settled on the settee and resigned himself to a weekend on the grog, watching mind-numbing TV shows and ordering cheap takeaways.

Uncle David's in Town

The first few days of the fifth week of term seemed to last forever for Tom. He was robotic on Monday, recuperating from the weekend, and he performed his duties perfunctorily. Most of his lessons were either badly prepared or extemporaneous. He lapsed into his 'private moments' whenever there was no external stimulus, and these became increasingly like a continuum interrupted by pupils' questions.

There were so many questions, Tom thought, as he ambled home listlessly on Wednesday afternoon. He wondered how many he answered in a typical day, watching each foot tread hypnotically in front of the other. He reckoned on getting about ten, on average, in the queue outside his classroom before the lesson even began. In total, he extrapolated approximately a question for every two minutes he was inside the school grounds. Tom usually stayed after school doing extra-curricular activities, so he calculated he must do around forty-five hours a week. That came to one thousand, three hundred and fifty questions every single week! And about half of these required an on-the-spot decision that, if answered badly, could potentially ruin a lesson.

Stop Talking

He picked up his wallet from his flat and headed down the hill toward the sea front. His uncle was in town, and he was due to meet him at his hotel for a drink. That the drink would become a multitude, there was no doubt; his uncle was a seasoned alcoholic. Tom felt ambivalent about spending time alone with the man, and about drinking for that matter, as he could still feel the effects of the carnage from the previous weekend. The trouble was that his uncle kept himself perpetually tipsy. That meant that with one or two additional drinks he was drunk again and, being such, had a proclivity for repeating stories (mercifully with greater and greater aggrandisement) throughout the course of an evening. In order that you didn't become ossified with tedium, you had to get fairly inebriated yourself and that, being his uncle's primary target, was pretty easy to do.

At midnight, Tom, who had tried to stall the flow of liquor from the start, thanked his uncle for a very entertaining evening and made as if to leave. At that moment, however, the waiter showed up with two tumblers and a decanter of Jack Daniels. His uncle smiled sheepishly as he signed the tab. Realising that to decline would be too much of a social faux pas, Tom sighed discretely, poured himself a glass and quaffed the lot in one go. His restraint thus far, he realised, had been a total waste of time, and he now just wanted to get rid of the decanter and go home. Unfortunately, the whisky did its job quite quickly and Tom started to enjoy himself. All of a sudden, his uncle's stories became much more interesting, and he even found he had some comparable ones. At one time, in response to a tale involving an encounter with a crocodile in the Australian bush, Tom recounted hunting bull sharks with a spear off the coast of Fiji. When his uncle described how he had walked for forty miles in a single day across the lower foothills of the Himalayas, Tom answered

with a story about running a hundred, also in twenty-four hours, across the Cotswold Hills in England for Comic Relief. Soon, no factual content of any kind was required to inspire their escapades and it became more a match of imagination than anything else.

At two o' clock in the morning, Tom returned from the hotel toilets to find his uncle asleep in his chair, snoring loudly.

'Uncle David,' said Tom, jiggling his uncle's shoulder. 'Uncle David, wake up... wake up, Uncle David, you've got to go to your room.'

Tom kept shaking his uncle, but to no avail. He hailed a waiter over and explained that he had to go but that his uncle was a patron of the hotel. The waiter eyed the paralytic, wheezing, barrel-shaped old man dubiously but assured Tom that he would get help and carry him to his room. Tom felt guilty about leaving his uncle in the hands of the waiters, but he was barely able to walk himself, let alone support someone else.

Half an hour later, he arrived back at his flat and collapsed face down on top of his bed and passed out.

Putting Children First

Somewhere in Tom's bedroom, a radio alarm was playing some eerie choral music. It sounded nice in the background, but he desperately needed to satisfy a need of a more earthly nature. Tom went into the bathroom and tried to urinate but it was impossible. No matter how hard he squeezed, it refused to come out. Apart from the discomfort of needing to pass water, he also felt a burning desire to consume it. Tom gave up trying to pee and bent over the basin to drink from the tap. Again, no matter how much he drank, he could not quench his thirst.

'John Tavener's *Song for Athene*,' spoke the mellifluous voice of Classic fm's morning DJ, cutting through the membranous, billowing walls of Tom's dream. A huge, celestial hand grabbed Tom's body from under the surface of the soft, inky lake of his sleeping brain and set him down roughly on the dry ground of consciousness.

Tom sat up quickly, head spinning, and looked at the clock: 8.15am. Shit! He must have slept through half an hour of the alarm before

waking, he realised, as the thought of being late for staff briefing pumped adrenaline into his blood.

Tom washed, changed, and was out of his flat within ten minutes. Contrary to expectation, he actually felt OK, although he realised that this was simply because he was still drunk. With the intention of disguising the smell of alcohol on his breath, he stopped by the corner shop on the way to school to buy some chewing gum. Tom just about made it to the staffroom before briefing started, and he made his way discretely to the kitchen area at the back where he hid behind the enormous frame of Mr. Terry. He was completely oblivious to the short announcements, as he concentrated on quietly making a coffee, and failed to hear the sounds of people leaving at the end.

‘Good morning, Mr. Langston.’

Tom looked up sharply and felt the usual tightening in his stomach at the sight of Hilary with her frosty smile. Acutely aware of the fumes on his breath, Tom made the regrettable decision to attempt to speak by inhaling.

‘Hi,’ Tom croaked, as if doing an impression of someone who’d just been shot in the throat.

‘Pardon?’

Tom grinned idiotically, as his face reddened with the effort of holding his breath, and shook his head.

‘Could I have the lesson plan for 8X4 tomorrow, please?’ said Hilary, looking at Tom curiously.

Tom nodded his head like a dashboard spring-toy and continued to look at Hilary fatuously. She held his glazed eyes with a smile that was

Stop Talking

now more like a grimace, but as the interminable seconds wore on, even that disappeared.

‘Yes..? Could I have it?’

Tom wondered how long he could simply go on nodding before he got the sack on the grounds of mental retardation. He risked it once more.

‘Well, where is it then?’ Hilary snapped in exasperation.

‘I thought you said you wanted it tomorrow,’ Tom blurted. The words, ‘I thought you said’, toppled over each other as Tom violently let loose the odious breath he had struggled to hold in, and then inhaling with the pronunciation of, ‘you wanted it tomorrow,’ sounded as if he’d been punched in the stomach. In the course of the sentence, not only was Hilary buffeted with a warm, humid, spirituous cloud, but she was also genuinely alarmed by the guttural, bestial noises emanating from Tom’s throat. The circus performance Tom was delivering was so freakish, Miss Clarke fortunately failed to recognise Tom’s untimely attempt at a joke. She simply stared at the degenerate creature before her incredulously.

‘I don’t know whether you are ill or merely hung over, Mr. Langston,’ she said, when she’d collected herself, ‘but if I don’t have that lesson plan by break time, you and I are going to have to have a very serious chat.’

Tom smiled brightly and nodded again. Hilary shook her head in incomprehension and stalked off. Tom exhaled a long breath and turned back to his coffee. He realised with surprise that he wasn’t all that perturbed by the interaction. With the ongoing attack from pupils and the Head, his superego, in the interest of self-preservation, had responded by attempting to transcend the realms of mortal vulnerability. The alcohol

coursing through his blood stream was now allowing him that freedom and giving a welcome temporary relief to the stress.

Flouting etiquette, Tom carried his coffee down to the music block and waited casually on the steps for his upper-stream Year 7 class. He smiled as they gathered below, jostling each other for position in the queue. He swayed slightly. This was going to be fun.

‘Single file, facing the front, no talking!’ he barked, in his customary regimental manner. Tom prided himself on being able to deliver the command in a violent high-speed torrent, and it nearly always elicited a question about whether he’d been in the army.

‘Sir, were you in the army?’ someone asked.

‘SAS, but I’m afraid I can’t talk about it.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because if I do, Tony Blair might think there is a threat to national security and send some paras to kill me.’

Tom had forgotten to put his phone on silent and at that moment it rang. Flouting etiquette for the second time that morning, Tom answered it.

‘Good morning, Tony,’ Tom greeted, adopting a militaristic stance and saluting.

‘What?’ said his mother at the other end.

‘A situation in Iraq?’ said Tom, frowning. ‘You need advice on how to handle it? OK, I’ll get back to you in an hour – I have to teach 7Y1 first.’

‘What on earth are you talking about?’ asked his mother in confusion.

Stop Talking

‘I know, I know, don’t tell any pupils any top secret information without killing them afterwards.’

‘Tom? Is that you? I have no idea...’

Mr. Langston hung up. The more innocent members of his class were silent as they gawped up at him, while some of the savvier ones started giggling.

‘Who was that, sir?’ a boy called.

‘Tony – Tony Blair,’ said Tom in a far-off voice, pretending to ponder the predicament in Iraq.

‘No, it wasn’t...’ he replied uncertainly, ‘...was it?’

‘Fraid so, looks like it’s time for the big guns to go over and sort things out. Could mean this is your last lesson with me. If I don’t make it out alive, light a candle in assembly, say a prayer, and every time you play *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, imagine that I am one of those little stars looking down from heaven, checking you’re not sticking chewing gum to the underside of the tables.’ Tom sighed heavily with the burden of his duties to mankind.

‘Oh sir, that’s terrible!’ a girl cried.

‘Sir, don’t go!’ another called out.

‘Damn it!’ Mr. Langston wailed wretchedly. ‘You’ve just got to move on with your lives!’

‘Who’s going to take us for music, then?’

‘All right, don’t move on that quickly!’ said Mr. Langston, contriving an expression of offence.

7Y1 laughed somewhat uncertainly and upon command, marched with alacrity into the classroom, where they waited behind their chairs. Mr.

Langston explained the task quickly and then asked if there were any questions. No one raised a hand.

‘OK,’ said Mr. Langston, in a moment of drunken inspiration. ‘I’m going to give you an example of what should, and what should not, happen when you go into the practice rooms.’

Mr. Langston then proceeded to perform a monologue, in which he played four characters from 7Y1. He cleared his throat.

“Billy,” said Christina [Mr. Langston spoke in a thin, high-pitched voice to the great appreciation of 7Y1] “why haven’t you got an instrument? You know Mr. Langston said you need to choose an instrument *before* you go into the practice rooms.”

“Goodness me, Christina, you’re right,” Billy replied. [Mr. Langston adopted the coarse tone that Billy tended to put on. Again, though the similarity was only approximate, the class was thoroughly enjoying this new brand of humour that their eccentric music teacher had conceived, and shrill peals of laughter came in waves with each sentence.] “How on earth could I forget such a simple and reasonable instruction? I’ll just go and get one and hope that Mr. Langston doesn’t tell me off – as I deserve.”

“OK, Nick,” said Christina, “why don’t you start playing the eight-note theme, called the Balungan, which Mr. Langston so memorably described.”

[Mr. Langston looked at Nick, remembering that his voice had broken, and paused dramatically. The class hushed in anticipation of Mr. Langston’s next impression. Mr. Langston cleared his throat again, rolled his head and cracked his fingers theatrically.]

Stop Talking

“Forgive me, Christina but...” [7Y1 fell about in hysterics and drowned him out. Mr. Langston could not suppress a smile as he waited for it to die down.] “I was so enchanted by Mr. Langston’s wonderful demonstrations that I confess I may have missed exactly how to go about that. Do show me.”

“I could, my dearest Nicholas...” [Mr. Langston peered at the register] “Tobias... Frederick... Salisbury-James...” [7Y1 sniggered at Nick’s bellyful of names] “But thus far, poor, shy Angela has remained silent and I would be crushed to think that she might feel excluded. Why don’t you play the Balungan, Angela?”

[Again, Mr. Langston paused dramatically to heighten the anticipation. Everyone knew Angela was from London and had a strong cockney accent.]

“All wight, mate! I ain’t got no beef with’at – it’s is easy is ridin’ a bike, innit?!”

[Tom’s impression this time, owing to his previous year in the capital, was pretty good. 7Y1 collapsed over their desks and a few cheered and clapped. Tom wished all of his lessons were as well received as this one. He recorded an eight-note theme with the electric piano marimba timbre, and set it to loop, so that it would keep repeating.]

“Fair Angela, I am overcome by the exquisite beauty of that tune. Please teach me how to play it,” said Billy longingly, as he returned with a xylophone.

“I’d lav toe Billy – but I mastn’t. I’m sure yo rem...” Mr. Langston abandoned the accent in the interest of not talking gibberish. “Remember Mr. Langston saying wisely that we were not to double the parts.”

Putting Children First

“I stand corrected, Angela. I do remember him saying that wisely. In which case, may I make so bold as to play a quaver decoration of that theme, an octave higher in pitch?”

“I think that would be lovely, Billy,” Angela replied.

[Mr. Langston recorded a faster tune over the top of the crotchet theme in a xylophone timbre.]

“Angela!” Christina exploded jealously. “Stop looking at Billy with those love-sick eyes just because he’s so good at music, even though that is the best reason to love someone.”

[Mr. Langston did an aside to the class. ‘As everyone knows, Christina has fancied Billy for ages.’ 7Y1 shrieked their agreement and both Christina and Billy buried their heads in their hands. ‘Shuddup... no, I don’t,’ the real Christina whined in embarrassment.]

“I’m going to play a semiquaver decoration of the theme, two octaves higher in pitch,” Angela stated. “I must remember that I have to fit four notes in the time of every crotchet, so it is going to be very fast. So that I don’t make loads of mistakes and let the group *and* my family down, please slow the tempo until I’ve practised a bit.”

“Of course, Angela,” said Billy, returning Angela’s loving gaze. “I wouldn’t hear of anything else.”

[Mr. Langston slowed the tempo of the metronome and recorded a semiquaver pattern over the first two recordings in a glockenspiel timbre.]

“That sounds terrific!” Nick shouted, wild with excitement. “I wish I had music lessons all day so we could listen to it again and again.”

“We all agree!” the others chorused.

“Alas, there remains no part for me,” added Nick sadly.

Stop Talking

“Yes, there is!” said Christina. “You shall play the gong part. It’s simple – you just play one note at the start of each phrase.”

“Alack, you mock my inferior musical skills. Oh, how I would love to be as accomplished as you and gain the street cred’ you have.” Nick hung his head forlornly.

[7Y1 snickered at the thought of gaining street cred’ from playing a piece of tuned percussion, but not too loudly, in case Mr. Langston singled them out and incorporated them into his bizarre little play.]

“Nay, fellow Nick! ‘Tis not so. The part is but simple in a technical way. You have to count carefully lest you miss the first beat and we all stray and lose ourselves in the wilderness,” exclaimed Christina. “Let you be our shepherd and we shall be your flock.”

“*What* are you talking about?!” cried Nick.

“Don’t know. Just play C every eight beats, OK?”

[The class continued to snort and snigger, albeit with a little apprehension, as Mr. Langston recorded the fourth and final part using the traditional gong sound, two octaves below the crotchet theme. He then upped the tempo and replayed the whole thing at the right pace.]

“Oh, what joy,” laughed Angela.

“Oh, what delight,” sang Christina.

“Oh, what...” Mr. Langston paused, “rapture!” chortled Billy.

“Oh...” [Mr. Langston ran out of words] grunted Nick.

“That really does sound so great,” they all exclaimed at the same time, “but let us not forget that we could never have got to where we are today without our edifying, visionary and handsome music teacher. We really should thank him every lesson, particularly if someone important is

in the room, and bring gifts such as homemade cookies and our dinner money.”

Tom realised that, through his semi-inebriated performance, he would forevermore be perceived by his audience of innocent Year 7s as a bit insane, but he didn't much care. That was the beauty of his current mindset; you could do what you wanted without worrying about the consequences. After all, when you think your life can't get much worse, you haven't got much to lose, have you?

Tom remembered that he was supposed to give Hilary his lesson plan by break, but he didn't finish it until lunchtime and handed the cursory outline to the Head's secretary on his way to the canteen. The drunkenness had worn off by this time, and he now just had a splitting headache. When he arrived, the usual pandemonium was breaking out in the queues. The dinner ladies were a hundred per cent incapable of asserting control over even the most compliant Year 7s, and most teachers simply steered clear of the area to avoid having to deal with the inevitable trouble. As he approached, a dinner lady came up to him and complained that she'd been called a fucking fat cow. Realising by the tired monotone of her voice that she was probably called this, or something similar, every day of the week, Tom didn't bother to ask by whom. Instead, he walked into the canteen to the front of the queue and blocked the path to the servers. As soon as he'd committed himself, Tom realised the foolishness of the deed. He had pitted the weight of his slender authority against over half a year group of hungry Year 10s. These kids had been at the school for over three years and regarded Mr. Langston as a new kid on the block – an easy target for seasoned veterans such as they. Nevertheless, Tom realised, there was no way out of it now.

Stop Talking

‘Nobody gets served until you get in line, against the wall, and stop pushing!’ he shouted, battling the cacophony.

‘What?!’ several chorused, as the mass of bodies swelled in front of him.

‘Anyone pushing will be sent to the back!’ he shouted more loudly.

Volume in numbers gave pupils individual anonymity, and with it, a sense of invulnerability. The pushing and shoving continued, and Tom realised he was going to have to pick on one of the main troublemakers to make an example of him. The boy at the front fell into Mr. Langston, causing him to take a step backwards. A cheer went up from the crowd, but the tall teenager in front of Tom looked sincerely apologetic.

‘Sorry, sir. Someone pushed me.’

‘Who pushed you?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Right, everyone out!’ Tom barked, committing himself again, this time to a mountainous task. He surveyed the swaying mob before him and calculated there must be around thirty people in the canteen itself and over a hundred outside. He either had to get the whole line to move or send the kids in the canteen to the back. The former was impossible, as he couldn’t even see the pupils outside, and the latter seemed unfair, as it was very difficult to tell who the culprits were, and therefore unjustifiable. Either way was too much for the mere assertion of Tom’s will to prevail. The riot raged on and pupils laughed at his attempt to get order. A few more pupils ducked under the arms of the dinner lady at the door and squeezed into the melee. Tom looked around for help, but no one was at hand.

‘You need help, sir?’ a pupil called.

Putting Children First

‘Can’t you handle us by yourself?’ another shouted.

‘I can certainly handle standing here, and while I am, no one is getting any food.’

‘Wanker!’ someone shouted.

‘How did you know?’ Tom replied, half to himself.

With the situation deteriorating, Tom decided it was time to cut a deal. He called out to the elderly dinner lady at the entrance to lock the door. In response, the pitiable woman tried to oblige, but when she attempted to pull the door shut, several big, yobbish lads deliberately got in the way. Angered by the sight of such obnoxious behaviour toward an old lady, Tom turned to the kitchen staff and asked that they not serve anyone until the problem had been resolved. Then he strode over to the entrance and pulled the door shut aggressively, knocking the louts out of the way as he did so. Tom held on to the handle as the dinner lady turned the key, while outside, the lads, their pride ruffled, swore at him and kicked the door violently. Tom then returned to the front of the line to find kids reaching over the counter and grabbing things. The cooks were screaming at them, and the crowd loved it. Tom pulled the metal shutters down over the hatch and stood there with his arms folded, a deceptively confident smile on his face.

‘Listen to me!’ he shouted over the din. ‘I’ve locked the door, so no one’s getting in or out. No one is going to get served until I say, so you can stand there pushing each other all lunchtime for all I care, but you will not get any food. Now, I’ve told you to go out, so that’s what you’re going to do. If you do it straightaway, you will not have to go in last. Walk outside, without saying a word to anybody, and join the back of the line. I

Stop Talking

will then open the side door and the back of the queue will become the front. Get it?’

Owing to its intrinsic trickery, the compromise was well received by those who heard it, and when one of the popular, influential boys finally grasped the idea and persuaded his friends to go with him, the tide turned. The dinner lady unlocked the door, and one by one, the boisterous group filed out, smirking as they went. Mr. Langston followed the lofty boy out and waited until he had joined the back of the line, right outside the side entrance.

‘If there is anyone who is prepared to help make the queue less of a rugby scrum by joining the back, do it now – it’s in your interest,’ he bellowed, trying not to let his intimidation by the size of the crowd show.

‘Why is it in our interest, sir?’ a girl shouted.

‘Let me answer by merely saying the meek shall inherit the earth,’ Mr. Langston replied sententiously.

One or two of the brightest pupils moved quietly to the back of the queue, but the rest, fortunately for Tom, steadfastly refused to budge and remained wedged in the crush. Mr. Langston then walked around the building to the back of the line, and before the big, cool, bleach-haired footballers at the front knew what was happening, it was filing in through the other entrance. Tom followed the procession into the canteen with a big fat smile on his face. What he had managed to achieve, single-handedly, was impressive for anyone – let alone an NQT. The kitchen staff, if they had any sense or appreciation, would be laying out the red carpet for him. Grinning like a boy who’s just pulled off a brilliant practical joke, Tom walked to the front and held out his tray to the head server as if he expected it to be laden with prizes.

‘Sorry, sir,’ she responded flatly. ‘Teachers have to queue with pupils now.’

‘Yeah, good one – come on, meal of the day, please.’

‘Sorry, sir, it’s the new rules. Teachers have to queue up with pupils. I can’t...’

‘What?!’ Tom interrupted the server. He couldn’t believe his ears.

‘It’s the new rules – the Head said so.’

Tom would normally have been embarrassed at being undermined in front of pupils, but in his present state of mental ill health, he just got angry.

‘Did you see what I just did? I come in here every lunchtime and this place is like Butlins on acid. I just managed to sort it out without a shred of assistance from any of your ineffectual dinner ladies, or supervisors, or paediatric technicians, or whatever they’re called, and now you’re refusing to serve me?’

‘Sorry, sir. It’s school policy.’

‘I couldn’t give a toss if it’s the law!’

Tom reached over the counter and grabbed a burger and a baked potato.

‘Hey! You can’t do that!’ she protested.

‘It would seem that I can,’ Tom replied and turned to the line of kids standing peaceably beside the wall, a powerful rage surging inside him.

‘What do you think you’re doing?!’ he roared. ‘Don’t line up and wait your turn. Push everyone else out of the way and barge to the front. And don’t talk quietly – scream your heads off! When you’ve finished, leave your trays on the tables and throw your rubbish on the floor. *OK?!*’

Stop Talking

With that, Tom stormed out of the canteen and up the drive to the main entrance. He'd had enough of this zoo the idiots at the local education authority had the nerve to call a school. He hadn't any lessons that afternoon anyway, and in truth, it was just as well. It wouldn't have taken much for him to say something regrettable to a pupil and risk facing disciplinary action for a second time. When he was out of sight, he hurled the burger and potato high over the school fence and into the tennis courts. With immense satisfaction, he heard people cry out as globs of food rained down on their heads.

As soon as he arrived back at his flat, he donned his running kit and ran, full-tilt, down to the sea front. When he got there, he turned left and careered along a wooded coastal path until his body racked with nausea. Tom stopped at a boulder and leant against it, gasping raggedly. The exercise had done something to relieve his anger, but he still felt as though he wanted to hurt someone. The cathartic pleasure of violence was something Tom had experienced only a few times, but recently, it had become part of his life. He straightened up as the pain subsided, and the familiar sight of the brooding oil tanker caught his eye. Clouds were gathering ominously overhead and the choppy water of the bay pined for the friendly, inspiring kiss of sunlight. In the distance, the blanket of cloud ended and shafts of sunlight beamed down like golden searchlights from heaven. The sea out there shone and glistened and danced appreciatively under a thin band of marvellous blue sky, and the view that Tom always found so alluring seemed doubly so. He felt as if it were taunting him in a symbolic way – showing him a better life without offering it. He would give anything to jump on board a ship and sail to that happy place and then keep going, over the horizon, and far, far away. He

would sail and sail until he reached a tropical island where he would live out the rest of his days in blissful solitude. He'd eat fruits and berries and sleep in a hammock and swim in the clear, warm ocean every day, and he would forget all about Brentmouth Secondary School with its hostile pupils, persecutory Head and ridiculous kitchen staff. He would never again have to attach another beater head to its handle, or remove another piece of gum from under the tables, or clean another piece of profane graffiti off the walls. He would never again have to say 'Be quiet' or 'Sit down' or 'Stop talking' or 'Get in line' or 'Listen'. A simple, primitive existence on an uncharted island jungle in the middle of the open sea was, at that exact moment, Tom's idea of paradise.

Stop Fucking Talking

When Tom arrived at work the next day, Pete and Julian were waiting for him outside the music block. They both looked concerned.

‘Morning,’ said Tom, trying to be casual.

‘Everything all right?’ Julian asked.

‘Yeah, why?’ Tom replied cautiously.

‘I heard there was an altercation between you and one of the lunchtime supervisors yesterday.’

‘*Lunchtime supervisors?*’ Tom sneered. ‘Is *that* what they’re called?’ He was already on the defensive and every word dripped with sarcasm. Julian stepped back with a look of surprise.

‘They couldn’t supervise dead people in a game of sleeping lions. I single-handedly managed to put a stop to a riot in the Year 10 canteen yesterday, and when I then tried to get served, the one who looks as though she’s been made out of play-dough said she wouldn’t serve me because that stupid bitch, who sits in her office all day doing bugger all and claims to be running this circus, has invented some ridiculous new rule about

Stop Fucking Talking

teachers queuing up with pupils. Is that at the same time as dealing with the constant chaos going on in there? Presumably, if you step out of line to stop Shaun Bratcher from running round and skidding on the floor, you have to go to the back when you've finished lest you be accused of pushing in!'

Tom got more and more worked up during the diatribe until he was practically shouting at Julian as if it were his fault.

'All right, mate, calm down,' said Julian, trying to mollify his subordinate. 'You feeling OK?'

'Frankly no, Julian. I mean, you have to put up with aggro day in – day out at this dump. We all do. But I don't see anyone else getting hounded all the time like I do. And no one else has received written threa...'

'What? Written threats? What are you talking about?' Julian asked, looking at Pete to see if he knew. Shit, Tom thought. He'd forgotten he hadn't told his head of department. Pete dutifully acted as mystified as Julian.

'Oh, nothing,' Tom mumbled. 'Somebody left a note underneath my front door at home. Must be one of the other tenants in the building.'

'Really?'

'Yeah, it's nothing. Anyway, the point is, on top of all the normal crap, the Head's got it in for me. In the first week, she undermines my authority in front of a class of pupils, then she takes the word of some disturbed, bottom stream Year 8 kid over mine and subsequently threatens me with disciplinary action, then she has a second go at me for the way I'm teaching 8X4 – this time in front of the Chief Education Advisor for

Stop Talking

Devon – and finally, she threatens me with a “serious chat” for not having a lesson plan to hand in the staffroom.’

Tom had gone through the list a few times in his head before and the words came out in a torrent. He paused for breath.

‘I mean,’ he continued more slowly and with more control, ‘obviously some things deserve some sort of punitive action, but the problem I have with her is the action she does decide to take and, in particular, the *way* she takes it. You know she’s observing my lesson, period 5?’ Tom fished about in his jacket for his keys.

‘Yes,’ Julian replied. ‘She wanted me to come in as well, but she couldn’t find cover, and I said I couldn’t leave my class unattended even if they are a choir of angels compared to your lot.’

Tom knew that if this were true, it should have been Julian, as his head of department, and not he, who should have taken the class from hell’s rectum. However, Julian was the first to admit that, when it came to classroom management, he was struggling far more than Tom. He confided that he was even losing the battle with the Year 7s, and that now, there wasn’t a lesson on the timetable to which he looked forward. In the face of this honesty, and the realisation of the humiliation and demoralisation it must cause Julian, Tom forgave his line manager’s lack of support. He found his keys, bent over, and stuck the long master in the door.

‘Did you tell the kids to start throwing food around the canteen?’ asked Pete, opening his mouth for the first time that morning. His face had almost completely healed up, Tom noticed, but he seemed quite pale.

‘No!’ Tom stood up. ‘Well... I may have told them not to bother finding a bin when they’d finished – why, is that what happened?’

Stop Fucking Talking

‘There was a serious food fight. The whole senior management team had to go down there and sort it out. Jackson got in the line of fire and so did Morgan. Only Smith got away clean.’

‘What about Hilary?’

Pete snorted. ‘Yeah, right! She waited until it had died down before she went in.’

‘Did the head of year show up?’

‘Yeah, but she hung back as well.’

‘How do you know all this?’

Pete laughed humourlessly. ‘Because I, along with every other teacher in the school, was watching it from the staffroom!’

‘Jesus!’ Tom raised his eyebrows and went back to wiggling the key about.

‘Anyway,’ Julian interjected, ‘the point is, one of the supervisors told Hilary what had happened and...’

‘Now I’m in trouble!’ Tom interrupted and stubbed his fingers as he lost his grip. His temper snapped and he threw the bunch of keys at the door. ‘Oh, fucking, no! What bad luck! Like I wasn’t already. I mean, everything was going really well until then, wasn’t it? How could I ruin it all by being so stupid? I imagine Hilary had trouble believing her ears, didn’t she? Probably told that fat walrus I would never say anything like that. Probably defended me to the hilt, knowing her.’

‘Tom, come on...’ said Julian nervously, seeing Tom losing control.

‘Why? Every day I come in, something gets worse at this, this... hideout for the terminally light-headed, and now, to add to the list, I’m in trouble for inciting a riot in the canteen. I don’t know why I don’t get

Stop Talking

signed off for three months. I bet I could get any doctor in the area to do it.'

'Yes, but surely it's not as bad as that, mate?' Julian seemed genuinely alarmed.

'Well, it is. I am not usually the sort of person to blow things out of proportion, but the fact is, I have never in my life been so angry, on a day-to-day basis, as I have been since I started here. I was so angry yesterday in the canteen that I walked out of school. And I'm not even sure I would have come back if I did have lessons. I hate...' Tom balled his fists and clenched his teeth so hard that the muscles in his jaw protruded from his face. 'I hate the fact that I have been brought down to this, but it's pointless... pointless to pretend that I haven't.' He paused as the wave of frustration eased slightly. 'Look, whatever. I'll keep coming in for the time being. The way it's going, I'll probably be suspended anyway.'

'I'm really sorry,' said Julian, with touching sincerity. 'I wasn't aware you were feeling this way. You do a pretty good job of appearing like you don't let anything get to you. We'll talk about this later.'

Pete looked at Tom meaningfully. 'Basketball, then squash club?'

Tom nodded distractedly, picked his keys up and unlocked the door and went inside. He dumped his case on the desk and lay down on one of the tables in the middle of the classroom. Tom was free for the first hour that day and was in no mood to start doing admin. He stared at the ceiling tiles, which had been peppered with holes where beaters had been plunged through them, and waited to be summoned to the Head's office to account for yesterday's fiasco. Tom lapsed into his accustomed semi-meditative trance and tried to distance himself from all the trouble. Cocooned inside what he had come to think of as his little shell, he

Stop Fucking Talking

gradually began to feel as though his problems could not touch him. That he was shielded, inviolable. But the little shell was translucent, and he could see out. Out there, he could still see the gravity of his situation and the damage he was doing to his career. He remembered the looks on Julian and Pete's faces, looks that meant they didn't recognise him. He could hear the concern in their voices, voices of sense, voices that threatened to drag him out of his protective sphere and make him face up to reality.

By break time, no message had arrived, so when Tom was stirred from his reveries by the plangent ringing of the school bell, he wandered outside to gaze absent-mindedly over the playing fields. Autumn leaves had gathered in piles around the perimeter and masked the litter beneath. Occasional gusts picked them up and tossed the debris skywards, whereupon it fell playfully through the air in zigzags. The sounds of children playing seemed distant and dream-like, as if from another world, and the wind rushing in his ears made the feeling of isolation even more acute.

A football bounced over from a group of Year 9 boys, who called to Mr. Langston to return it. Dutifully, Tom kicked it toward them and he heard, faintly through the shell walls, the customary cheers of approval at the sight of a teacher doing something sporty. He felt a presence at his side.

'Hi,' said Julian, following his gaze vaguely to the playing field below.

Tom glanced up in acknowledgement. He suspected that Julian was desperate to make amends for his inability to lighten the burden over the past few weeks, but that he had no idea how to accomplish it. The fact that he hadn't spotted Tom's distress was not Julian's fault; Tom knew his

Stop Talking

stoicism disguised his true feelings, as well as his character. In addition, it kept others at a distance that made them unwilling to try to break through that seemingly impregnable exterior and get to know him.

Tom waited, expecting a speech about however bad things get, all is not lost and the virtuous will prevail or something.

‘I’ve resigned,’ Julian announced.

‘What?!’

‘I’ve resigned,’ Julian repeated. ‘I can’t do this job anymore. I wake up every morning and dread the day ahead. My classroom has become nothing more than a battleground. Even the Year 7s are not learning anything anymore, and they don’t have an ounce of respect for me or each other. The language they use is horrific,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘And it’s not getting better it’s getting worse. It has been for over two years now – ever since Hilary arrived. And to top it off, I’ve let you down...’ Julian hung his head in heartfelt regret.

‘Ah, come on, mate,’ Tom intervened, feeling guilty all of a sudden. ‘It would have...’

‘No, no. I’ve let you down. I know I have. If I had been stronger, I could have alleviated some of the problems. That is my job and I haven’t been able to do it because I’ve been so consumed by problems of my own.’

‘Well...’ The truth in what Julian said was so self-evident that Tom resisted his instinct to argue. ‘But I’d hate to think you’ve resigned partly because of me.’

‘It’s not because of you directly, but you *are* a testament to the fact that I cannot do my job. You – and the fact that no one is learning anything in my lessons anymore.’ Julian sighed. ‘Anyway, it’s done.’

Stop Fucking Talking

Hilary accepted my resignation and the post will be advertised the week after half-term. I leave at Christmas.'

'So what are you going to do, then?'

'Well, obviously I've been thinking about it for some time and I have one or two ideas.'

'Such as what?'

'Primary school teaching... supply teaching... I could try to apply for another head of music position, but it would have to be in the area because of the kids, and there aren't likely to be any vacancies for a while. Besides, there is a huge stigma attached to this place and all the teachers who have been tarred with its brush. It's as if they're damaged goods or something. Especially ones who have resigned because they couldn't hack it.'

'That's a bit unfair. There are some great teachers at this school,' said Tom, realising after he'd said it that he had noticeably implied Julian's exclusion from this group. 'I'd like to see some of those Nimrods from the grammar schools last one day here. They'd get crucified.'

'You know that. I know that. But until you've actually experienced it first hand, you can't possibly know what it's like to teach in an environment like this. I bet every one of those...'

Julian retracted the expletive that almost made it out of his mouth. 'I bet every one of those...'

'Stuck-up pricks?' Tom suggested, finding a trace of humour left within him.

'...them thinks they could come down here and show us all how it's done.'

Stop Talking

Tom laughed scornfully. 'You're probably right – the bunch of ignorant, arrogant fools.'

'Well... yep,' Julian conceded.

'Well, I'm sorry that it has come to it, but maybe it's the right move. At least you can see the end now.'

The bell for second lesson rang, and Tom and Julian made their way silently and pensively back up the slope to the music block.

The conversation with Julian put things back into perspective a bit for Tom. If he had to resign, it certainly wouldn't look good on his resume and he could count on Hilary refusing him a reference, but he wasn't shackled to the local area by a family and still felt reasonably confident about his teaching ability. If he wanted to leave at the end of term, he could leave. It was silly, it suddenly occurred to Tom, that he had not entertained this possibility before. Apart from getting fired, that was more-or-less the worst possible outcome. At times like these, he thought, nodding in agreement with himself, you had to remember the bigger picture. Brentmouth School was not the be-all and end-all. In a few years, this episode would be a distant memory.

Tom's favourite view in the world planted itself in his head as he dismissed his Year 11 class at lunchtime, and he smiled in genuine happiness for the first time in days. He could see that sparkling, laughing blue horizon as though he could reach out and touch it, his arms warm and tingly under the sun. He was free to do whatever he wanted; Hilary could do her worst but she could not stop him leaving.

Tom strolled up to the canteen, feeling as if the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. Why on earth had he been so worried? Just bloody leave if you don't like it, he said out loud to himself

Stop Fucking Talking

– who cares? Tom shook his head in wonder at how great life had suddenly become. He felt as though he had just emerged from his cocoon as a beautiful butterfly, free to fly wherever the whim should take him.

He entered the Year 10 canteen and the customary furore hit him in the face like a whirling dervish. He took two steps inside and was instantly caught up in it – kids jostling each other, kids trying to squeeze into non-existent gaps in the line, kids running, kids sitting on tables, kids throwing bits of food, but above all, kids making a racket that would drive the appetite from the stomach of a starving wolf. Tom hesitated and looked around. He very nearly walked straight back out but spied Pete and Jim amidst the melee, looking as if they'd rather have their sustenance intravenously injected.

Tom sent a couple of kids outside for pushing in, told another off for screaming, stepped over a girl picking chips off the floor, and ordered a lad to sit with Mr. Tyler and Mr. Keaton for throwing a sandwich before he reached the front of the queue.

‘Afternoon, ladies!’ Tom hailed the servers in his sweetest voice.

They each adopted the surliest look they could manage and greeted Tom’s salutation with a cold silence.

‘Now, let’s see,’ he continued, smiling broadly. ‘The burgers don’t look too *wholesome* and the baked potato I had yesterday literally fell apart in my hands. What do you recommend?’

The servers stood in a row, icily refusing to acknowledge the question. Then, the one nearest to Tom couldn’t bear the atmosphere any longer and buckled.

‘Er, the um... meal of the day is all right.’

Stop Talking

‘It’s all right, is it?’ asked Tom, brimming with mock enthusiasm. ‘You mean as in, there’s nothing wrong with it or, when I eat it, I will actually enjoy myself.’

‘Uh?’

‘I was wondering if, as I’m eating the meal of the day, I will think, “I’m having a better time now than I was *before* I started eating the meal of the day”?’

The icy looks turned to confusion. They reminded Tom of a row of cows at a fence as they gawked at him behind the counter in muted stupefaction. He could just see their slack lower jaws moving rhythmically from side to side as they chewed the cud.

‘OK. Back to basics. Could you tell me what the meal of the day actually is?’

‘Beef Stroganoff,’ the head server replied crisply.

‘Excellent. And which one of you kind ladies would be helpful enough to point out which of these indistinguishable gourmet dishes is the beat your bollocks off?’ he enquired, inspecting the row of trays with theatrical mystification.

A few questioning sniggers arose from kids standing directly behind Mr. Langston, but the joke was otherwise unheard. Without taking her disapproving scowl off Tom, the head server gestured toward a tray full of congealing lumpy stuff with a casual flick of her wrist. As she did so, her hand caught the handle of the ladle resting on the edge, and bits of stroganoff were catapulted into the air. Brown splodges splattered onto the pink and white uniforms of the servers and dripped, globule-by-globule, down toward their feet.

Stop Fucking Talking

The best part of the image for Tom, before he collapsed into fits of side-aching laughter, was that for a second or two the line of startled bovine beasts tried to act as if nothing had happened. Somehow, they thought that by not reacting to the glistening material rolling down their aprons, no one would notice. Then, slowly, realising their dignity was unsalvageable, they started to clean themselves up.

In the meantime, the head server, who had somehow escaped the spray, had no idea how to react to the situation. Her brain was overloading with all kinds of conflicting messages, and as a result, the body under its control could do nothing except continue as before. Her eyes continued to boggle and her mouth still hung agape as Tom rocked back and forth, hanging on to the counter for support. Behind him, howling their approval, a horde of hysterical children compounded her ignominy.

‘I think I’ll try that one then please,’ Tom said in bursts, pointing to the dish. ‘Only, I would prefer it on a plate, if that’s OK!’

Roars of laughter came from the crowd surrounding Mr. Langston as he exacted sweet, if somewhat misdirected, revenge for being rebuffed the previous day.

The head server continued to stare at Tom for a few moments as if she’d turned to stone, before managing finally to regain control. The comically discombobulated woman reached down stiffly, picked up the ladle off the floor and wiped it on her apron. Then, with the worst will in the world, she scooped a portion of the gooey mess and dumped it onto his plate.

‘That was brilliant,’ said Jim, laughing and slapping him on the shoulder as Tom took a seat beside him.

‘Did you see it?’ Tom replied, still chuckling. ‘That was karma.’

Stop Talking

‘Absolutely.’

‘Now look, Steven,’ said Tom, putting on a stern face and turning to the pupil he’d sent over for throwing a sandwich. ‘You’ll get your lunch when we’ve finished. For now, you just sit there and watch us eat our delicious hot food. If you hear anything we say, it’s made up, OK?’

Steven glowered at Mr. Langston for a second, then grunted and swivelled around sulkily.

‘I take it you heard about yesterday,’ said Tom, turning back.

‘I saw it from the staffroom, mate,’ Jim replied.

‘Did Pete tell you what happened?’

‘Yeah. Apparently, you incited a riot because they wouldn’t serve you.’

‘Yeah, but do you know what I did beforehand?’

‘I’m only joking. It’s a bullshit rule anyway. I can see the principle behind it, but we’ve got things to do at lunchtime – they haven’t.’

‘And the teachers who do come in here are the ones who are prepared to help sort out trouble. That should be rewarded,’ Pete added.

‘I agree, but it doesn’t really matter,’ said Tom brightly, raining salt and pepper over his food to disguise the taste. ‘Hilary’s observing my lesson period 5. It’ll probably be awful and then she’ll have two reasons to suspend me.’

‘You really think that’ll happen?’

‘Well, she’s had it in for me from the first week.’

‘I know what you mean. She either likes you or she doesn’t.’

‘Well, sod it. I don’t care what happens anymore.’

Tom picked a glob of alien-looking black substance out of the stroganoff and examined it suspiciously.

Stop Fucking Talking

Jim smiled at Tom's expression of disgust. 'I can't see her suspending you though,' he said. 'It's not like there's a backlog of teachers waiting to jump at the chance of working here.'

'True,' said Pete, chuckling as Tom smeared the offending item on the side of his plate only to find something else hiding in the vegetables. 'You are, to a certain extent, irreplaceable in that respect.'

'Well actually, you're more right than you think,' said Tom, forgetting his lunch for a moment and lowering his voice. 'Julian resigned this morning.'

'No way?!' Pete exclaimed.

'About an hour after you last spoke to him, actually.'

'Why?' Jim asked, leaning in.

'He just said he couldn't hack it anymore. After my outburst earlier, he realised I was having a bad time of it too and concluded he wasn't doing his job properly as head of department.'

'What outburst?'

'Oh, I was just going on about how there's seems to be a new issue every day,' Tom replied, playing it down.

'Well anyway, that's a real shame,' said Jim, returning his attention to Julian's resignation.

'Is it official?' Pete asked.

'Yep. Handed the letter in at break and Hilary accepted it.'

'Well, you're right, I'm right then. You're in a stronger position than it looks like.'

'We'll see. But if it doesn't get any better, I may just throw the towel in as well. Apart from getting to know you two, nothing of any good has come to me here since I took my first register.'

Stop Talking

Jim looked up in alarm. ‘Don’t be stupid!’ he snorted, unaware of the extent of Tom’s recent internal conflict.

Pete shook his head in regret. ‘Well, I hope you don’t, mate.’

‘Yeah, likewise. What are you talking about?!’ Jim exclaimed. ‘This place is a complete dump but...’ He exchanged glances with Pete, ‘...so much more bearable with people around to laugh at it with,’ he finished, frowning quizzically.

‘Seriously though, whatever happens, we’ll do whatever we can,’ said Pete.

‘Which will probably be sod all,’ Jim pointed out.

‘Exactly, but we’ll do whatever we can,’ Pete reiterated.

‘Cheers,’ Tom muttered.

There was a break in the conversation as they chewed their food without enthusiasm.

‘You told him about you know who and the wasps’ nest yet?’ Tom asked, looking at Pete and jerking his head at Jim.

‘Yeah, he agrees with you.’

‘Wanker... sorry Steven,’ Jim apologised, noticing the scruffy Year 8 boy stealing a glance at him. He lowered his voice. ‘The nasty son-of-a-bitch. Couldn’t believe it when I heard.’ Jim tutted in disgust. ‘Oh!’ he exclaimed. ‘I haven’t told you, have I?’

‘What?’ Pete asked.

‘He didn’t write that note.’

‘What... you mean *my* note?’ Tom whispered, leaning forward.

‘Yes. He was in hospital that weekend for another operation on his...’ Jim stopped, realising that if Steven could hear, the word ‘hand’ might identify the subject of their discussion. ‘I only found out a couple of

Stop Fucking Talking

days ago. He couldn't have written it.' Jim finished the last grisly morsel as if swallowing an insect, leant back, and folded his arms.

'Well, he could have *written* it, just not delivered it,' Pete pointed out.

'Yeah, OK. The point is someone else is involved. Someone who, in all probability, knows him.'

'They might not know him,' said Tom. 'Could be we've been barking up the wrong tree all along.'

Jim scratched his stubble and pondered the suggestion. 'No,' he said eventually. 'There's too much to connect him to it.'

'I agree,' said Pete. 'Too much of a coincidence. Whoever wrote and/or delivered that note is almost certain to know, or be connected to, him.' He paused. 'Well, bugger me with a bargepole! This truly is a *Murder She Wrote* mystery.'

'You still watching that?' Tom asked, with a rare smile. 'I thought we established it was censored viewing.'

'Sorry, mate, I told you – I like Angela Lansbury. I want to have her babies.'

Steven giggled. He was clearly listening to every word. All three of them looked at him in feigned, overt offence until he shut up.

'Well you're more likely to have them than her,' said Tom, still glaring at Steven. 'She's about eighty-five!'

'Yeah, whatever children she ever gave birth to would come out looking like...' Jim paused for inspiration as Steven, compelled by intrigue, turned around to find out, '...like Steven!' he finished, laughing at the unfortunate lad's gormless, bemused expression.

Stop Talking

Partly because of the uplifting effect that the prospect of leaving Brentmouth was having, and partly because it was exactly what he needed, Tom found Jim's comment so funny he dissolved helplessly into hysterics. And because he was exuding such genuine mirth, it set the other two off as well. It was a pretty sad sight to see: three teachers sitting in a canteen full of children, covering their faces to disguise their amusement as their shoulders jiggled up and down uncontrollably. Steven looked at them in disgust and, deciding they were no longer worthy of his obedience, stormed off in a huff. It was a moment of shocking clarity for the roguish twelve-year-old; his teachers were as pathetically human as he was.



The bell rang for the end of period 4, and Tom dismissed the first of his lower stream Year 8 classes after a comparatively easy lesson. He cast a glance over the classroom to check for litter and stray chairs and then stepped outside. It had grown even more blustery during the course of the day, Tom noticed ruefully. If there was one weather condition, second only to snow, that got children excited it was wind. Julian appeared at the top of the steps to his side of the block and was knocked back inside as a sudden blast caught the door and slammed it in his face.

‘You OK?’ Tom shouted across to him when he re-emerged.

‘Fine!’ Julian yelled back. He was smiling, Tom noticed. Being able to see the light at the end of the tunnel was obviously working. ‘Good luck!’

‘Ta.’

Stop Fucking Talking

The sounds of children running and shouting came from the woods at the top of the bank. Rather than wait for Shaun or any of his mates to appear dangling above the undergrowth from the limbs of a tree, Tom left his post at the steps to do a reconnaissance. He quickly found a group of miscreants squatting conspicuously behind a rhododendron. Amidst the swirling flurries, Tom tiptoed inaudibly up behind them and crouched down.

‘Who are we hiding from?’ he whispered.

A couple of them started and fell over backwards in surprise.

‘Ah fair play, sir, we was hiding from you,’ one boy answered, laughing comradely.

‘Shame. I really fancied a game of hide-and-seek,’ said Mr. Langston, sarcasm rolling around his mouth like a big ball of fat. ‘Now,’ he continued, clapping two boys on the back and speaking as one might to toddlers, ‘last one to the back of the queue picks the chewing gum from under the tables with their teeth.’

The little gang bolted at the thought of having to perform the repugnant task. The funny thing about it, Tom thought, was that if he actually tried to get any of them to do it, they’d simply refuse. Nonetheless, they still acted as though it were a real threat. Again, he surmised, the trick was in the competition.

Mr. Langston emerged from the woods at the same moment as Miss Clarke was passing on the path. Unfortunately for both of them, that meant they had to walk down to the music block together.

‘Afternoon, Mr. Langston.’ Miss Clarke was carrying a folder and a clipboard close to her chest as if it concealed confidential information.

‘Hello.’

Stop Talking

‘Are you all prepared I hope?’

‘Should be.’

‘Right.’ Miss Clarke chuckled to herself.

Now that the moment of reckoning had arrived, Tom felt a bit nervous. He reminded himself not to worry because he could resign, but the prospect of leaving his first appointment after just one term now seemed pretty dismal. Feeling the sense of freedom desert him, Tom sought refuge in his cocoon once more, but it felt more thin and fragile than ever. Oh come on, he told himself. Sort it out for Christ’s sake! He used to consider himself so unflappable. What the hell was happening to him? He was so accustomed to relying on the core of self-confidence he had built within himself that now, when he delved down and found it crumbling, he could see no outcome of this lesson other than a demeaning, humiliating debacle.

‘Stand in line, facing the front, no talking!’ Mr. Langston barked his usual command without gusto, the wind drowning most of his words.

‘What?’ a girl yelled.

Mr. Langston motioned with his arms to move against the side of the hut, but the girl only mimicked the gesture and several others followed suit.

‘You know what to do!’ Mr. Langston shouted.

‘What?’ Shaun shouted back. ‘Climb trees and play football? That’s what we did last lesson, miss!’

Miss Clarke stood, part way up the steps, clutching the clipboard with a fixed smile on her face. She wouldn’t be particularly surprised if they had. She’d never been as wrong about a person as she had been about this young man. The guy she thought she had appointed was eager to learn,

Stop Fucking Talking

levelheaded and intelligent. The guy standing next to her was an irresponsible, uncouth, cocky, volatile yob who, in any working environment that involved contact with children, would be a real liability. The fact that there might be a lesson in that flew so far above Hilary's head that it could have defecated directly above her and still not soiled her short, grey mullet.

‘Not because I asked you to,’ Mr. Langston replied lamely.

‘What?’ Shaun bellowed. ‘Can’t hear you!’

‘Not because I asked you to,’ Mr. Langston repeated just as another blast swept his words away in a maelstrom of leaves and crisp packets that spun and whirled around the children's heads like a flock of seagulls around a sandwich. ‘Now get in line!’

‘What?! Sir, we can’t hear you! Aah!’ Another girl cried out as her hair whipped across her face and blinded her.

A lad, unable to contain his excitement, pretended to fall over with the force of the wind, whereupon two of his friends bundled on top of him. Despite the fact that it was his lesson, Tom was still taken aback by the display of unfettered, obstreperous behaviour in front of the Head. He thought they would curb their rowdiness, but instead they were using the opportunity to show off.

‘Why are you here, miss?’ Ryan called out.

Good question, thought Mr. Langston.

‘Yeah!’ Aaron chimed in. ‘Is Mr. Langston in trouble, miss?’

‘Has Mr. Langston beat someone up again, miss?’ asked Phil.

For a moment, Tom thought Miss Clarke was going to ignore this question as well, but to his relief, she opened her mouth.

‘No, no,’ she replied.

Stop Talking

She dignified the question with an answer! Tom stared at her in outrage and then averted his eyes before she caught the hatred in them. Respond, by all means, but not with an answer! Tell him off, ask to see him after the lesson, divert the question at the very least, but don't answer it!

'All right, come in then!' said Mr. Langston, rubbing his forehead in disbelief.

Inside, the usual chaos reigned supreme. After the tactical error last week, Mr. Langston abandoned what he'd been taught and ploughed ahead with a string of reprimands.

'Right. All of you, sit down and stop talking.'

'Aaron, stop talking.'

'Kelly, stop talking.'

'Ryan, sit down.'

'Shaun, stop playing the drum.'

'Aaron, you can't sit next to Darren. Because you always get distracted. Yes, you do.'

'Betsan, what's the matter? Well don't look at him then!'

'Aaron, *you* move – Darren was there first.'

'Ryan, sit there. No, there. Because I said so!'

'Shaun, give me that drum. *Now*, Shaun! Now go and sit down.'

'Tracey, either put your ipod away or I'll confiscate it. Well put it away then.'

'Fran, sit up.'

'He's not staring at you, Betsan. If anything, you're staring at him.'

Stop Fucking Talking

Tom stole a glance at Hilary and saw that she was looking around, shaking her head. He tried to ignore her.

‘Whose can is that leaking everywhere? Kelly, is that yours? Whose is it then? Well pick it up anyway, will you, and put it in the bin. Because I said so! KELLY!’

‘What did you say, Nyssa? Phil, stop kicking her chair or you’ll sit at my desk for the rest of the lesson. You will! What’s that? It had better be nothing.’

‘Tracey, put that ipod away so I can’t see it. I know you’re not listening to it, but I don’t want the earphones coming out of your shirt. Do it or you won’t see it again until next week.’

‘Fran, sit up, for crying out loud.’

‘Shaun, what are you doing *now*?! Put it back on the shelf!’

‘Ryan, do you think I’m blind or something?! Sit where I told you to.’

‘Betsan, if you say that one more time, I’ll make you sit next to him!’

‘Kelly, why isn’t that can in the bin? I don’t care if it’s not yours – put it in the bin, NOW!’

‘Ryan, be quiet.’

‘Aaron, be quiet and turn round.’

‘Kelly, sit down.’

‘Phil, stop leaning back in your chair.’

‘Sharon, stop talking and leaning back in your chair.’

‘Shaun. SHAUN! I told you to put that down. Put it down! Now be quiet.’

‘Kelly, stop talking. Kelly stop talking. Ke- Kelly, Kelly...’

Stop Talking

‘Aaron...’

‘Kelly...’

Tom shot another glance at Hilary, who was now sitting there covering her eyes with her hand. In that moment, he could have killed her.

‘Everyone listen to me. Stop talking and listen! All of you – stop talking! STOP TALKING AND LISTEN! *STOP TALKING AND LISTEN! ALL OF YOU! STOP TALKING AND LISTEN! STOP... FUCKING... TALKING... AND... FUCKING... LISTEN!!*’

8X4 stopped fucking talking and fucking listened. Unfortunately, Mr. Langston had nothing further to say. Even if he could remember the lesson he’d planned, it hardly seemed appropriate to go ahead with it now. He looked at Miss Clarke. She was staring at him as if he’d grown horns and a tail. The blotchy shade of crimson that usually coloured her ruddy complexion was markedly absent and she looked quite pale and scared. Even Shaun was dumbstruck by this sudden and shocking loss of control.

‘Well, I guess that’s it then,’ said Mr. Langston quietly, in the now deathly silent room. ‘You’ve all got what you wanted. You’ve pushed me and pushed me... including you...’ Tom looked at the Head, who was staring at her feet, ‘...and now you’ve got what you wanted.’

Tom picked up his case and opened it. Eyes rooted to the floor, everyone in the room sat like statues in an atmosphere spitting with nerves. No one dared even peek at their teacher as he put his lesson plan and his pen carefully inside the case, picked up his keys and walked out. With the whine of the hinges as the door swung open and the tread of footsteps on the path outside, the class mustered the courage to follow Mr. Langston’s diminishing form discretely as he descended the bank. But it wasn’t until they saw their teacher disappear into the woods that, akin to the cracking

Stop Fucking Talking

of a sheet of ice on a lake, the tension broke and released everyone from its paralysing grip.

The Last Straw

A car pulled up outside Tom's flat, and the bumper of a Nissan Primera appeared at the living room window. Tom glanced up from gazing blindly at the fireplace and let out a long, heavy sigh. The intercom sounded in the hall, and he pushed himself wearily from the settee. Without speaking, Tom pressed the receiver against the buzzer until he heard the front door open. He then jammed his own door open and went and sat down again. Pete and Jim stepped timidly into the room.

‘What happened?’ Pete asked cautiously.

Tom said nothing for a few moments and then spoke in a strained monotone.

‘They were a nightmare as normal, maybe worse in some ways because of Hilary being there. I tried for several minutes to settle them down, and then all of a sudden, I lost it and told them to stop fucking talking and fucking listen. After that I didn't see much point in carrying on, so I walked out and came home.’

The answer was met with stunned silence.

The Last Straw

‘Jesus, mate,’ Jim finally responded quietly. ‘Why do you think you lost it? I mean I know what it’s like but...’ he trailed off.

‘I don’t know. I just feel like I’m not in control. I’ve felt less and less in control with every week I’ve been at that place. I’ve tried to separate myself from all the anger and frustration by shutting it out and pretending it didn’t exist, but that didn’t work...’ Tom sighed again. ‘And today, after I found out that Julian had resigned, I told myself I didn’t care what happens but when it came to the lesson, I knew I did. I used to think of myself as a laid back and self-confident sort of person, but now it seems that either I’ve lost, or never really had, both of those qualities.’

‘But, you know,’ Jim persisted, ‘how can you go from one extreme to the other in such a short space of time?’

‘I don’t know – I honestly don’t.’

‘Fuck it,’ said Jim almost angrily, clearly deciding the therapy session was over. ‘It’s Friday. Let’s go to the pub.’

‘Yeah? Which one? Crazy Horse, by any chance?’ Pete enquired.

‘Yeah – it’s two for one ‘til seven.’

‘Is it...’ said Pete, smirking.

The three NQTs ambled down to the sea front. Throngs of Brentmouth pupils littered the high street and, instead of hiding like pupils from normal schools, called out to their teachers enthusiastically as they passed. It was as though from being objects of contempt, loathing and ridicule, they had been elevated to the status of local stars – all because of a change of location. Jim nodded stiffly in acknowledgement of the unwanted attention and attempted to smile as if he were pleased to see them. Pete grinned, apparently unperturbed by the ostentatious greetings

Stop Talking

and inquisitive looks from pedestrians. Tom ignored them all completely and hoped fervently that they didn't come across anyone from 8X4.

'All right, sir!' a girl yelled from across the street.

Pete waved and then turned back to the conversation.

'Sir! All right?!' her friend shouted, wanting to join in. She was linked arm-in-arm with the first girl and waving maniacally. Behind the pair, a group of about six Year 11 girls stood giggling and tugging at each other.

Jim smiled, nodded and quickened his pace, while Tom pretended to see something of interest in the opposite direction.

'Sir!'

'Yep, hello!' Pete called.

'Sir!'

'Oh, for the love of God, fuck off!' Jim muttered, as the group attempted to cross the street.

'Right, whichever pub's first...' said Tom, lengthening his stride.

The girls hurried across the road shrieking and attracting the attention of every shopper within a hundred yard radius. Their journey should have been quick, but with ridiculous heels and skirts painted to their legs, it took an eternity.

'Sir!' one screeched, as they struggled to catch up.

'Christ almi... hello Melissa, you all right?' Mr. Tyler asked.

'Yeah, is it true about Mr. Langston?' she asked, flicking a nervous glance in Tom's direction.

'Is what true?' asked Jim, doing an excellent job of looking innocent.

The Last Straw

‘That he’s going to get the sack for telling the Head to um...’
Melissa faltered.

‘To what?’

‘Well, fuck off.’

‘No, that’s definitely not true.’

‘But everyone’s saying it.’

‘Well everyone’s wrong, then,’ Pete intervened.

‘So why did he walk out of his lesson, then?’

‘Sir?’ said Charlie, butting in before anyone could answer. ‘Are you going to buy something in there?’

The huddle of girls snorted and sniggered at Mr. Langston, who had thus far been cupping his brow to the window of the nearest shop. Tom focussed on the racks inside and saw an array of lingerie.

‘This isn’t the pub!’ he cried. ‘Come on guys!’

‘Sir, why did you walk out of your lesson?’ Melissa persisted.

‘Because I forgot it was Tony Blair’s birthday and I was the guest of honour.’

‘What?’

‘Look, it’s Tony Blair’s birthday today and he invited me to go and play *Happy Birthday* on the piano.’

‘Yeah right, course he did,’ said Melissa in annoyance, folding her arms and tapping her foot.

‘Yeah, like we believe you.’ Charlie sniffed haughtily.

‘Sir, why did you really walk out?’ a voice called loudly from behind. ‘Come on, you can tell us!’

‘Can I?’ asked Mr. Langston sarcastically. ‘What – you and everyone else on the high street? Oh, all right then. I walked out because I

Stop Talking

couldn't stand the thought of spending another second in that shit hole you call a school. Best of luck with your exams!'

Tom stepped into the road, causing a squeal of brakes from an oncoming bus, crossed over and went into The Camelot. Pete and Jim smiled politely at the group.

'He's just joking,' said Pete mildly. 'Have a nice weekend.'

The pub was a typical old English, grey stone building with walls as thick as passages. As Tom walked in, darkness shrouded him and he had difficulty finding his way to the bar without bumping into things. He ordered three pints of lager and downed half of his while he waited for the others. As his eyes started to adjust, he looked around and admired the period decoration and profusion of authentic bucolic ornaments, most of which were either made from copper or leather. They were nailed to the walls, resting on shelves, and hanging from every available inch of ceiling space. Right above his head, Tom could make out a polished coalscuttle, some pots and pans, and a horse bridle hanging from a massive ancient beam. Pete and Jim appeared, moving cautiously through the gloom toward their friend and ducking the overhanging objects.

'Tom, you know you haven't lost it yet?' said Jim, sliding onto a tall oak bar stool.

'Lost what?' Tom responded, a little pugnaciously, 'I've definitely lost my rag a few times recently, and I may have irretrievably lost my sanity.'

'No, you know, like your job, career whatever.'

'Haven't I?'

'Well, you don't know what's going to happen yet. I mean, well...'

The Last Straw

‘You’re saying he shouldn’t be saying stuff like that in front of kids while there’s still a chance of him pulling through,’ Pete interrupted.

‘Yes.’

‘Yeah – like I’m going to.’ Tom was clearly in no mood to be cheered up.

‘Definitely. Well, I mean, while there’s still a chance...’ Pete’s tone lacked conviction.

Tom laughed humourlessly. ‘To be honest, I’m not sure I want to pull through.’

‘Oh, come on. Of course you do!’ said Jim, trying to rally him.

‘And why do you say that?’

‘Well, you don’t know what it’ll be like next year. Hilary could resign, or better still, get the sack. Or she might turn her attention to someone else or something. You’ve got to see the bigger picture here,’ Jim continued, warming to his perspective. ‘If you can get through this, you’ll be all the stronger for it and you’ll have won. See it as a battle against Hilary if you like.’

‘That is a good way of seeing it, mate, but what you’re not getting is that I don’t feel in control anymore. I didn’t premeditate saying that stuff to those kids. In fact, all I was trying to do was avoid any sort of interaction and get away from them, but as soon as I started talking, I knew I was probably going to come out with something I would regret.’

‘So do you feel like that now?’ Jim asked.

‘No. It’s only when I feel pressured, or like, attacked in some way.’

Tom sensed that they were both having difficulty with this concept. ‘Look, don’t worry about it. I’m going to resign on Monday, so it

Stop Talking

doesn't matter. Assuming that by doing that, Hilary is satisfied, none of this matters.'

'You still can't go round telling kids the school you teach at is a shit hole though, mate!' said Jim.

'To be honest, Jim, I don't give a fuck. But I'm hoping that when I do resign, this out of control feeling will go away anyway.'

'So you're definitely going to resign then?' Pete asked.

'Yep.'

Pete and Jim sat there in silence for a few moments.

'Fucking hell!' Pete exclaimed suddenly. 'That's shit, that is. You're a good teacher. This shouldn't be happening.'

'Look, you two are OK,' Tom pointed out. 'Maybe if I was better, it wouldn't.'

'No, that's bollocks,' Pete replied, dismissively. 'Apart from the incident with me a few weeks ago, she's left us two alone.'

'You seem to have dealt with the wasps' nest thing pretty well,' said Tom, realising they had not discussed it properly since the day it happened. 'You had any thoughts about... you know...' he stopped in case Pete had since decided to keep his vengeful ideas to himself.

'You mean getting Roy back?'

'Yes.'

'No. I couldn't think of anything that wasn't highly risky. Besides, he leaves for a lifetime of unemployment in May. I'm sure I'll bump into him on a dark night in some dodgy part of Brentmouth when he's had too many drinks to remember what hit him.'

The Last Straw

‘Much as it pains me to admit it,’ said Jim, ‘he’s actually quite bright. I wouldn’t be surprised if, even without pulling his finger out, he scrapes into the local technology college.’

‘Whatever. The opportunity is bound to come up at some point, but I’m not going to do anything until he’s officially an ex-pupil.’

‘Has anyone said anything to you about it since?’

‘Oh...’ Pete rolled his eyes, blew his cheeks out and exhaled a long breath to calm himself.

‘What?’ asked Tom.

‘Some of his Year 11 mates came up to me the other day and asked me if the wasp stings still hurt, then started laughing about it.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I smiled and walked into my classroom before I hit one of them.’

‘Well done, mate. That’s about the best thing you could have done,’ said Jim, nodding in admiration at Pete’s self-control.

‘Anyway, as I was saying,’ Pete went on, not wishing to dwell on the subject. ‘When it comes to anything the Head’s done, we’ve had a pretty easy ride.’

‘I’m surprised she hasn’t had a go at you for hanging round with me,’ said Tom, chuckling. ‘To be honest, I think it was the Shaun Bratcher episode. Something about the way I handled it got to her. I was a bit arrogant and dismissive, and I think she wanted it to end up with me in the shit and having to formally apologise to her to get out of it. The fact that it all looked as if she were making a big deal out of nothing really pissed her off. Also, she just doesn’t like the fact that I don’t tend to conform, she thinks I take the job too casually, I don’t kiss her arse, I probably exude an air of insolence when I’m in her company... she just doesn’t like *me*.’

Stop Talking

‘Actually, I think she just doesn’t like *men*,’ said Jim, folding his arms and smiling knowingly.

‘Really?’ Tom asked.

‘Positive.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Well, she’s fifties and got no husband. She lives with a woman. She’s got short hair.’

‘Jim, you can’t assume she’s a lesbian just because she’s got short hair!’ said Pete, grinning.

‘Why not?’

‘Yeah, sorry – good point.’

‘The point is, Tom’s a bit of a... well, portrays the image of a young, sort of happy-go-lucky, player-type sort of bloke, you know...’ said Jim, beating around the bush.

‘You mean he’s a tart?’ asked Pete.

‘Yes!’ Jim laughed. ‘No – that’s just how he comes across.’

‘What are you talking about?!’ Tom exploded. ‘The only person I’ve had any contact with since I got here is Liz from the office.’

‘Yeah – and you know who *she* is right?’ said Jim, frowning quizzically.

‘No – who?’

‘You’re joking! You don’t know?’

‘No?’

‘She’s Hilary’s Goddaughter!’

‘Piss off is she!’ Tom looked from one to the other in the hope that it was a wind up.

‘She is, mate. I can’t believe you didn’t know.’

The Last Straw

‘You’re kidding me.’ Tom buried his face in his hands. ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I thought you knew!’

‘Did you know?’ Tom asked, lifting his head up and turning to Pete.

‘Yes, actually... although I can’t remember how I found out.’

‘Oh my God! That explains so much. Not only am I flippant, disrespectful and violent,’ said Tom, describing Hilary’s view of him more accurately than he knew, ‘but I treat women badly, including the one person in the world who, as a Christian, she has been charged to protect.’

‘And as a lesbian, against blokes like you who symbolise everything they hate,’ Pete added.

‘All right!’ Tom protested.

‘Anyway, the point, is it’s definitely personal,’ said Jim emphatically.

‘What is?’ asked Pete.

‘This whole thing about Hilary getting at Tom all the time.’

‘Well, yeah – obviously.’

‘No, what I mean is, Tom should not, in any way, think he’s not cut out for teaching. The *only* reason he’s got himself in trouble is because Hilary doesn’t like him.’

‘And the kids...’ Tom added.

‘Well, the kids are the catalyst. Hilary has to actually have something to beef about before she can take action. The kids provide that for her.’

‘That’s so bad, you know,’ said Pete, shaking his head. ‘You wouldn’t think that sort of thing goes on in schools.’

Stop Talking

‘Does mate – goes on everywhere,’ said Jim, assuming his role as the older, wiser one of the three. ‘When I was in the paper-manufacturing business, stuff like that happened all the time.’

‘Yeah, but you would have thought that in an institution that is supposed to be about helping people, a figure as prominent as the Head would rise above those sort of vindictive inclinations,’ Tom objected.

‘Well anyway, it does go on, and that’s that,’ Jim stated peremptorily. ‘The good news is that you can see this as a personal issue, not a professional one. If you can avoid swearing at any more kids, you could get yourself out of this.’

‘Mate,’ said Tom, in exasperation and slight annoyance, ‘I keep telling you, it’s not that I don’t try, it’s just that...’

‘You can’t stop it?’ Jim interrupted.

‘Yes, basically.’

‘But if things get better, for whatever reason, after a time you’ll get back to normal?’

‘Well as I said, I hope so,’ Tom replied, shrugging. ‘But I’ve never felt like this before, so I have no idea.’

‘Personally, I think if you can weather the storm, it’ll be worth it in the end. Just take it one day at a time and see what happens. You shouldn’t resign.’ Jim chinked Tom’s glass and burped to signal that he’d wrapped things up and they should change the subject.

‘Yeah, don’t resign yet. Fight the bitch!’ Pete shouted, raising his fist in mock defiance.

‘Yeah, fight the obnoxious, fat, lesbian cow!’ Jim added, loudly enough to raise a few eyebrows among the other patrons.

Tom was lifted by the news and the endorsement of his suspicion that she was persecuting him merely because she had developed a personal dislike of him. He had no idea how he was going to stop his outbursts and rages, but he now felt a powerful motivation to stand up for himself.

‘OK, lads. I will!’ Tom shouted, falling in with the jubilantly militant mood. He stood up and raised his glass. ‘Cheers!’

By the time the three separated, Tom was almost feeling positive about his situation. Strengthened by the righteousness of his cause, he would focus on staying calm and make a concerted effort to stop reacting so aggressively when confronted by challenging or provocative behaviour. He would feign respect and humility in front of the Head and give a demeanour of purposefulness and hard work. After each visit to her office, he would immediately write down everything that had been said. In this way, if it came to the crunch, he should have ample ammunition with which to defend himself. This was a personal battle between him and Hilary, and had nothing to do with his weaknesses as a teacher. It was simple.

Fuelled by several pints of lager and a dozen handfuls of urinated pub peanuts, Tom strode jauntily up the high street. Up ahead, he could see a bunch of kids loitering at the gates of the local church, so he took a diversion. Next to the park with the tennis courts, steps led sharply up the crest of the hill to a road that went behind his flat. It was dark and quiet and hardly anyone used the route. Slimy stone walls covered with thick ivy and dark green moss flanked the worn flagstones overbearingly on each side, and no moon illuminated his way.

Tom took the steps vigorously, two at a time, machinating about how he was going to turn the tide against his adversary and emerge with

Stop Talking

dignity intact and sweet victory in his veins. Suddenly, in the darkness just inches above his head, something roared ferociously. Tom's knees buckled in shock, and in that moment, he instinctively roared back. He looked up to find Shaun Bratcher's head and shoulders sticking up over the wall. Shaun was laughing at the way his teacher had reacted to the scare, and the sound struck a chord so violent within Tom that he shuddered. He screamed with a hatred so intense it chilled his heart, and when he started he couldn't stop. Tom screamed and screamed and fury coursed through his body, consuming the last dregs of his sanity and ravaging his soul. Then, gradually, the screaming began to fade. As it did, the voice became less and less his own, until in the end, the voice he could hear belonged to someone else and the screams drifted away into silence.

A Lesson to Remember

The bell rang for briefing and the beleaguered teachers of Brentmouth School filed slowly into the staffroom. The mood was always a bit subdued on a Monday with the prospect of a full week ahead, and most heads were down, glazed, drooping eyes fixed on cups of coffee or the blank spread of a weekly planner. It was a grey day outside, the coldest it had been since the summer, and the damp air seeped through to the skin.

Tom had arrived early at the staffroom and, to his amazement, found no letter in his pigeonhole concerning his lesson on Friday. Assuming, however, that most teachers would already be aware of what had happened, he made himself as inconspicuous as possible behind the pigeonholes and pretended to be absorbed in paperwork.

The door opened slowly and the squeak of its hinges floated across the hushed, crowded room as if heralding the entrance of an evil being. How apt and prophetic, thought at least half of the staff with a wry chuckle as every member of the senior management team walked in and stood in a row at the front. Everyone looked up at the line of grim faces. It was

Stop Talking

unusual for every member of the team to be present, as it left no one to patrol the problem areas of the site.

‘I received a phone call from the police this morning,’ Hilary began. ‘Shaun Bratcher was reported missing by his mother at 12.15 on Saturday morning. Apparently, he was with friends at Rose Park until 9.30 on Friday evening before he went off to buy a drink from the newsagents in Tor Point. According to the police, that is the last time anybody saw him. Two detectives from Devon constabulary are already on the premises and will be talking to some of the pupils throughout period 1 and perhaps period 2 as well. Each pupil concerned will be collected by a member of the senior management team in registration, taken to the Conference Room and, at the end of the proceedings, given a note to pass to their subject teachers to explain their absence. Regardless of whether there is anyone in your form who is required for questioning, all tutors must explain what has happened and ask that, if anyone knows anything, he or she should speak to Mr. Smith or me immediately. Any information given will be held in the strictest confidence by the police. If any of you hears anything, or indeed, knows anything about Shaun’s disappearance or whereabouts, please see me immediately after briefing.’

At the end of the announcement, there was a respectful silence. Not only had Hilary delivered the speech eloquently, she had also managed at short notice to come up with an efficient plan to minimise disruption to lessons. Hilary was feeling slightly triumphant; she couldn’t remember the last time anything she’d said had made such an impact. It swelled her ego to have been empowered with the authority to bear such weighty and ominous tidings unto her devoted underlings. That is, until a hand went up.

A Lesson to Remember

‘Where is the Conference Room?’ Mrs. Stanton asked.

‘It’s the old Time Out room,’ Miss Clarke replied.

‘It’s the what?’ asked Mrs. Stanton, craning her head forward, cupping her ear and screwing her eyes with a look of such concentration it looked as if it pained her.

‘It’s the old Time – Out – Room,’ Hilary repeated, with too much volume and enunciation for it to stop short of being patronising.

‘What’s the Time Out room?’ Pete whispered to Jim.

‘It’s where you send kids who you send out,’ Jim explained.

‘Never heard of it,’ Pete muttered.

‘Old?’ Mrs. Stanton’s thin, warbly voice continued, cutting through the whirl and rattle of the ancient school heaters.

‘Yes, we stopped using it last year, Mrs. Stanton,’ Miss Clarke replied briskly, clearly in no mood to stoop to answering foolish questions from an elderly lady on a half timetable.

‘Goodness!’ said Mrs. Stanton in real alarm. ‘Where have they all been going then?’

An unsuccessfully suppressed laugh resulted in an enormous snort from Mr. Terry, and the spell of awe from the announcement disintegrated.

‘Quite,’ Miss Clarke commented, unamused.

‘I’m surprised Shaun Bratcher’s the only one who’s gone missing this year!’ said Pete softly to Mr. Terry, who snorted again.

‘For those of you who weren’t here last year,’ Miss Clarke went on affectedly with a distinct note of irritation in her voice, ‘the Conference Room is the one next to the drama hall. There’s a plaque with “Conference Room” stuck to it.’

The faintest ooh spread around the staffroom.

Stop Talking

‘Actually, there isn’t,’ Mrs. Taylor piped up. ‘It got pulled off a couple of weeks ago.’

‘Did it? Why wasn’t I informed?’ Miss Clarke responded angrily, looking about at no one in particular in an attempt to make her ignorance of this fact someone else’s fault.

‘All right, is there anyone who doesn’t know where the Time Out... Conference Room is?’

A ripple of laughter greeted her mistake and Miss Clarke reddened in annoyance.

‘Good old Stanton,’ Mr. Terry chortled. ‘Deaf as a post and senile as a donkey.’

Hilary battled on with the rest of the day’s announcements, and the more conscientious teachers persisted with note taking. Everybody else exchanged glances and reflected upon their feelings at the news. There wasn’t a teacher in the room, with the possible exception of the Head, who wouldn’t be glad to see the back of Shaun, yet no one would wish any serious harm befall the highly strung, emotionally unstable young boy, even if he was a malicious and violent little bully. Internal moral struggles were being fought throughout the staffroom as teachers’ imaginations ran wild with possibilities. If Shaun were found drowned in one of the caves in the cliffs, Pete speculated, we should all feel sad. Yet there would be no sense of loss because the only way in which Shaun affects the lives of his teachers is an undesirable one. How is anyone supposed to feel genuinely sad unless suffering loss? After all, grief is as fundamentally selfish as all the other emotions, he mused. Whatever the denouement, he could read the excitement at the news in the faces of those around him and, feeling the same sensation within himself, felt a pang of guilt.

A Lesson to Remember

Despite the confusion over the whereabouts and even existence of the Conference Room, there was still an atmosphere from the news of Shaun's disappearance in the stuffy space after senior management left, and the need for a bit of light-hearted repartee was palpable.

'At least he might have a good reason for not handing his homework in this time,' said Mr. Terry quietly, testing the water.

'Eh?' said Mr. Keaton, cocking his head to one side.

'I said, at least he might have a good reason for not handing his homework in this time!' Mr. Terry repeated, a bit louder.

'Yeah, but you'll still give him a detention though, won't you?' Pete answered, the jocular tenor of his reply showing approval.

'Of course. Not that he'll show up.'

'Well he won't if he's missing, will he?' interjected Mr. Tilt of resistant materials.

'Probably just some elaborate excuse not to hand it in,' said Mr. Terry.

'Well it is maths homework!' said Mr. Hart, uncharacteristically eager to join in. Mr. Terry looked at him in surprise. He wasn't certain this man even spoke, let alone engaged in banter.

'What, like he ever does any homework for you?'

'I don't set any in Year 8.'

'Not surprised. That's because all you do is play *Baa, Baa Black Sheep* on the recorder, isn't it?' he responded provocatively.

This brought a laugh from all those within earshot.

'I don't know what you're laughing at,' Julian replied, turning to Mr. Tilt. 'I'd rather play a recorder than make one.'

'I dunno!' said Mrs. Taylor of religious education.

Stop Talking

‘OK,’ Julian continued, less confidently. ‘I’d rather play the recorder than read scriptures from the Bible.’

Sensitive of Julian’s resignation the previous week, Jim and Pete slipped away, not wishing to be part of the inevitable defeat that Mr. Hart would suffer at the unforgiving hands of veteran banterers, John Terry and Co.

‘I thought you were a Christian!’ said Mr. Terry, perplexed by this new side of a bloke he’d always regarded as a recluse.

‘I am. Doesn’t mean I’d rather read Genesis than play *Lord of the Dance* on the recorder.’

Julian had fared quite admirably until this point but blew it with this last comment.

‘I dunno!’ said Mr. Tilt. ‘I’d rather be pious than camp!’

Everyone laughed loudly and Julian realised the game was up. God only knew why he had tried to join in anyway. Should have kept his mouth shut as normal.

‘Excellent!’ he said, standing and putting on his coat. ‘Have a great day everyone. Good to see you all – missed you over the weekend!’

‘Not as much as Shaun!’ Mr. Terry finished, to great appreciation from the little crowd.

Jim arrived at his room to find Mr. Smith standing outside, peering at one of the clay sculptures in the wall displays. Mr. Smith was a short, wizened old man with a quick temper and a gravelly, smoker’s voice. His teeth were yellow, and his breath, although not putrid, smelt overpoweringly of pipe tobacco. Several strands of wispy hair were held by force of habit over a bald patch that shone reflectively under the corridor strip lights. His watery eyes looked big and wide behind the

bulletproof glasses, as if he were alarmed by Jim's approach. Without saying a word, Mr. Smith handed Jim a folded piece of paper, nodded slightly, and disappeared into the swirling river of pupils.

Jim opened the note to find Roy's name on it and a message to send him to the Conference Room immediately. He tutted and shook his head as he unlocked his door. Why was it always the same kids all the time? In Jim's estimation, if they could simply expel ten per cent of the kids at Brentmouth, they could turn the place around. As it was, the local education authority made it very difficult to get rid of even one child, let alone a hundred, and this malign mass spread its insidious, virulent disease until, in the end, nearly all kids were infected.

Mr. Tyler took the register quickly and understated the recent news, so that he could dismiss his form before Roy arrived. The grungy, querulous teenager was still habitually late each morning, despite the damage it was doing to his record and the waning of attention to his hand.

As the last one left, Roy stuck his mop of long, purple-streaked, charcoal hair around the door. 'I'm here sir, all right?'

'Come in, Roy.'

'Oh what?' he protested. 'You can see I'm here!'

'Just come in for a minute, will you?'

Roy huffed petulantly and stomped into the room. He flung himself at a chair with such force that it tipped up sideways onto two legs and sent him crashing to the floor the other side. Most teachers, despite the news they were about to give, would have been unable to stifle a laugh at the look of surprise and embarrassment on Roy's typically surly face. For Mr. Tyler, however, the ridiculously ostentatious display of unruliness was just typical of a pupil he had grown to hold in the utmost contempt and

Stop Talking

was therefore entirely unworthy of his amusement. Roy clambered to his feet and kicked the chair half-heartedly with one of his muddy Doc Martin's, as if that somehow regained some of his dignity. Mr. Tyler, mustering the most supercilious expression he could manage, stared at the realigned sour features of his least favourite pupil and waited for him to finish his botched entrance showcase.

'You all right there now, Roy?'

'Yeah,' he replied, clearly unable to think of a more challenging or insolent response.

'Have you heard the news about Shaun Bratcher?'

'Yes.'

'You have?' said Mr. Tyler with some surprise. 'How?'

'Heard about it from someone,' Roy replied vaguely, enjoying the sudden interest and attention from a teacher who normally ignored him.

'Who?'

'Can't remember.'

Roy pretended to find something of interest out of the window to give the impression that he was only half-listening.

'What did you hear?'

'Uh?'

'What did you...'

'He's run away from home again,' Roy interrupted.

'He's run away from home?!' Mr. Tyler repeated in amazement. 'You know the police are looking for him?'

'Are they?' asked Roy uninterestedly, studying the flaking, painted fingernails of his good hand. 'No point – he'll come back when he's hungry.'

A Lesson to Remember

‘He’ll come back whe... How do you know so much about it, Roy?’ asked Mr. Tyler, unsure his ears were functioning properly.

‘What? I don’t.’

‘Well who told you, then?’

‘I told you – I don’t remember.’ Roy flicked a piece of black nail polish onto the floor and sniffed. Mr. Tyler looked ready to strangle him.

‘All right, look,’ said Mr. Tyler finally in resignation. ‘The police are in school and they want to talk to you. Take your bag and go straight to the Conference Room.’

‘Which one’s that?’

‘The Time Out room, apparently. Do you know where that is?’

Roy snorted. ‘Do I know... Yeah, I know where that is.’

Roy lugged his flimsy, tattered rucksack over his shoulder and trudged out. Mr. Tyler stared after him, perplexed. How come he was so familiar with what was going on? Whatever the reason, he concluded, the police must have a good idea or they wouldn’t have summoned him for questioning.

Meanwhile, Pete was fielding all sorts of questions from his excitable Year 7 tutor group, following his announcement about Shaun’s disappearance.

‘Do you know where he is, sir?’

‘Why on earth would I know where he is?’ Mr. Keaton replied. ‘I didn’t kidnap him!’

‘Do the police know where he is?’

‘I assume that if they did, they wouldn’t be asking us.’

‘Do you think he’s run away, sir?’

‘It’s possible, yes.’

Stop Talking

‘Do you think he’s been kidnapped, sir?’

‘Unlikely, but not impossible.’

‘Do you think he’s been murdered, sir?’

‘Why would anyone murder a twelve-year-old boy?’

‘Because he’s Shaun Bratcher!’

‘Barry, this isn’t a joke, you know.’

‘He might have had an accident, or something, and can’t walk.’

‘Yes, that’s a possibility too. Look, your guess is as good as mine, I’m afraid. I only know what the Head told me just now. No one from this form is needed in the enquiries just yet, but if any of you knows anything at all, you should let Miss Clarke or Mr. Smith know straight away.’

‘Do you think he’s been abducted by aliens, sir?’

If he has been, Pete thought, we’ll be in no immediate danger of being invaded. ‘Well, that’s the most likely explanation, obviously. Now if that’s everything, you can pack up and go.’

Down in the music block, Tom stood in the darkness of a practice room, breathing deeply to compose himself and vacillating over whether he should say anything about seeing Shaun that night. All concern about Friday’s lesson had taken a back seat during the course of the briefing as he thought back to what had happened. He could remember screaming at Shaun like someone possessed, but after that, everything was a blank. The next thing he knew, he was climbing the steps back up to his flat. Normally, a little time lapse wouldn’t worry him at all, particularly after he’d been drinking, but suppose he was forgetting something that was crucial to finding the boy? On the other hand, if he went and told them about the incident but couldn’t describe what happened immediately afterwards, he might not only be wasting their time but also inadvertently

implicating himself. Tom wrestled with the dilemma all through first and second lessons, barely saying a word to his Year 11 class other than to instruct them to continue with coursework. He was conscious of them discussing the disappearance of Shaun Bratcher but pretended not to hear.

By the time the bell rang, Tom decided that, regardless of his temporary memory loss, it would look far worse if it were discovered at a later date that he saw Shaun that night but had failed to come forward. And, despite his dislike of the boy, he wouldn't be able to live with himself if something happened to Shaun that he could have prevented.

Tom knocked loudly on the Conference Room door and waited impatiently; he didn't want people to know he had anything to do with the enquiry. Through the reinforced glass he could see a slightly overweight, middle-aged man in a faded blue suit and a beige overcoat, sitting at a long, rectangular wooden table. Where on earth they'd managed to find such a nice piece of furniture, free of graffiti and compass carvings, Tom had no idea. He made himself conspicuous and caught the disapproving eye of a stern-looking younger man dressed in a smart grey suit. The policeman was holding a smart, pocket-sized, leather-bound notepad and was scribbling on it earnestly. Tom drew back as the door opened, and Roy Welland loped out, glancing at Mr. Langston oddly as he passed. The younger man appeared and looked at Tom questioningly from underneath his groomed side-parting.

'I'm here about the disappearance,' Tom stated briskly, not wishing to go into detail whilst standing in the corridor.

'Of course – come in,' the man said, standing aside and beckoning to a chair. 'Have a seat.'

Stop Talking

Tom hurried past him and sat on the chair least visible from the hallway.

‘Hello,’ said the middle-aged policeman with a soft Yorkshire accent. ‘My name is Detective Inspector Moss and this is Detective Constable Haseldon.’ DI Moss jerked his head in the direction of the younger man but kept his eyes on Tom. ‘And who might you be?’

‘I might be Tom Langston,’ said Tom as a joke that, in its poor reception, was to set the tone of the interview.

Moss looked at him disdainfully before grunting reluctantly in acknowledgement of Tom’s attempt at humour. Constable Haseldon waited until he heard the grunt before smiling fleetingly and perching himself in an intimidating, almost predatory, manner on the desk to Tom’s right. The atmosphere had gone from genial to belligerent in the space of a few seconds.

‘Is there something you’d like to tell us?’ Moss continued with a note of accusation, as if Tom had come for confession.

‘Well, there’s something I think might be of use,’ Tom corrected. He was already beginning to regret his act of fortitude.

‘OK,’ said Moss, indicating to Haseldon to take notes. ‘Try to be as exact and specific as you can.’

‘I was walking home from the pub on Friday night...’

‘Which pub?’ Moss interrupted.

‘The London – at the harbour.’

‘OK.’

‘And I saw Shaun Bratcher over the left wall of some steps that lead from Rose Park to Tor Point. He saw me and ran off.’

A Lesson to Remember

‘You saw Shaun Bratcher?’ Moss repeated, his demeanour altering instantly.

‘Yes.’

‘What time was this, sir?’ asked Haseldon, who, judging by his look of self-importance, clearly got to ask this question every time.

‘About ten o’clock – or at least it was by the time I got back.’

‘Got back?’ said Moss.

‘Got back home. I live in Brunswick Square in Tor Point.’

‘Did you say anything to each other?’

‘No, but he shouted when he saw me.’

‘What did he shout?’

‘No actual words – it was more like a roar, I guess.’

‘A roar?’ Moss raised his eyebrows.

‘Yes. He was pretending to be alarmed to see me, you know, as kids sometimes do when you run into them out of school.’

‘Pretending to be alarmed?’

‘Yes. Kids sometimes like to pretend that they’re mortified to see teachers outside school to show off to their friends.’

‘He was with friends?’

‘No,’ Tom replied, realising he was digging himself into a hole.

‘At least I didn’t see any, but force of habit, you know...’

‘Not entirely sure I do, Mr. Langston.’

‘Well, trust me – it’s true.’

‘All right, Mr. Langston, I’ll trust you...’ DI Moss glanced sidelong at Haseldon, who caught the look and smirked his alliance like a precocious schoolboy. ‘But you say you ran into each other?’

‘Well not literally, obviously.’

Stop Talking

‘No, of course not – forgive me – it’s just that we have to be absolutely certain what occurred, that’s all.’

Now that it appeared this teacher knew something that might be important, the inspector was desperately trying to soften his natural formality and sarcastic edge by being conciliatory, with limited success.

‘Did you say anything to him?’ he continued.

‘No.’

‘Nothing at all? Nothing that would have made him shout or scream?’

‘No.’

‘Really... strange.’ Moss rubbed his forehead dubiously.

‘And how high was the wall?’

‘About seven feet.’

‘Seven feet? So how could you see him?’

‘Because he was either standing on something or the ground is much higher on the other side,’ said Tom, with a hint of a sneer.

‘Of course, Mr. Langston. Obvious, really.’

While Tom knew that he was being a bit abrasive, he didn’t like the manner in which these two coppers were dealing with him when all he was trying to do was help out, and the whole scene reminded him too much of stereotypical police dramas on television. He also realised that Moss, at least, was playing dumb to elicit some careless contradiction or anomaly in his story. He felt his stomach tighten as he awaited the next question.

‘When he ran off,’ Moss went on slowly, measuring his every word, ‘did he look down first?’

A Lesson to Remember

‘Yes.’ OK, Tom thought quickly, as he focussed on keeping his story straight, so he *was* standing on something.

‘I see. What was he doing there, do you think?’

‘I have no idea. Maybe he was waiting for someone.’

‘Waiting for you, perhaps.’

‘Unlikely – how would he know I was coming?’

‘I don’t know, Mr. Langston. I don’t know.’ The inspector paused thoughtfully. ‘And then he ran off you say?’

‘Yes.’

‘How do you know?’

Tom’s heart leaped as he almost fell into the inspector’s trap by answering that he saw him from behind a seven-foot wall.

‘Because I heard him.’

‘So, forgive me Mr. Langston, but...’ Moss stopped and scratched his chin as though mystified, ‘how do you know he was running, then?’

‘Because of the speed and volume of the footsteps on the leaf litter in the woods.’

Moss laughed. ‘You seem to have remarkable powers of deduction, Mr. Langston. You should consider a career in CID.’

Realising it was appropriate for him to laugh too, Haseldon joined in exuberantly as Tom sat there staring out of the window with a look of what he hoped was the utmost derision. Their laughter eventually died and the two policemen seemed content simply to stare at him. Tom knitted and raised his eyebrows as he looked from one to the other in incomprehension. He had never had any serious dealings with the police before and had always assumed that at the heart of the institution lay a certain dignity and integrity. Boy, was he learning fast. Just then, Tom

Stop Talking

caught a movement in the bushes behind the constable's backside, which was still monopolising the desk next to him, and half rose. The detectives both turned around and then looked back at him quizzically.

'What?' asked the inspector.

Tom frowned. 'I thought I saw something but it was probably a bird or a squirrel or something.'

The inspector nodded at the constable, who leapt over to the window and peered into the shrubbery.

'I can't see anything,' he said finally.

'Right.' Moss turned back to Tom. 'Now where were we?'

The constable snatched his notepad off the table and scanned his notes voraciously. Before the policemen remembered the inspector's joke about his powers of deduction and fell about for a second time, Tom decided to justify his comment.

'I teach music,' he said, 'so I suppose I feel confident of my hearing.'

'You teach music, eh?' said Moss, suddenly amicable. 'My daughter's into music. She's just started learning the saxophone. Makes a hell of a racket, but she seems to enjoy it. Do you play an instrument?'

'Yes,' Tom replied. It would be a bit difficult for me to teach music otherwise, he thought. 'I play the saxophone as well, actually, and a bit of piano.'

'Really?!' the inspector exclaimed, appearing to enjoy the digression and smiling radiantly at Tom.

'Yep,' Tom responded after a few uncomfortable seconds. 'I do.'

'I suppose you listen to all that Kenny G stuff then, don't you?'

‘I *have* listened to it, yes,’ said Tom flatly, trying to make it clear that this was a discussion he’d already had a thousand times too often.

‘Do you teach Shaun, Mr. Langston?’ asked the inspector, swiftly returning to the issue at hand. He couldn’t have cared less what instrument Mr. Langston played. Despite the fact that this pugnacious, rather bullish fellow had come forward of his own accord, he suspected that he was omitting something and merely wanted to lull him into a false sense of security.

‘Yes.’

‘And how would you describe your relationship with him?’

‘We’ve had our moments, but otherwise it’s OK.’

‘Moments?’

‘I’ve had to send him out a couple of times, just like every other teacher. He is a very difficult boy to manage at times.’

‘Diffic...’ Moss began.

‘By difficult to manage,’ Tom interrupted irascibly, struggling to keep his temper, ‘I mean that he misbehaves in class, quite intentionally, to disrupt lessons for his and others’ entertainment. He’s in the bottom stream, which means he’s not particularly bright, and he’s on the special educational needs register for emotional and behavioural difficulties. To be honest, there isn’t a single teacher in this place who, given a choice, would keep him in their lessons.’

‘Really?’ said Moss, as though he found this sentiment shocking. ‘So would you say your relationship with him is the same as his other teachers?’

‘Similar, yes.’

Stop Talking

‘Similar. Put similar, not *the same*,’ said Inspector Moss to Constable Haseldon, as if the entire investigation rested on the difference.

Tom detected the sarcasm in the inspector’s voice and felt his patience ebb away further.

‘I guess that gives every teacher in the school a motive to get rid of him!’ said Tom sardonically, his hostility deepening.

Moss looked up. ‘Get rid of him?’

‘Yes. Get rid of him!’ said Tom, raising his voice.

‘Sorry, Mr. Langston,’ Haseldon interjected, pen poised. ‘Could you explain exactly what you mean by, “Get rid of him”?’

‘Oh, for Christ’s sake!’ Tom shouted. ‘Kidnap him, *murder* him, stick him on a space shuttle to a different galaxy! What’s wrong with you pair of idiots? Don’t you understand plain English?! I could have given this information to a bunch of half-witted Year 7s without needing to clarify the meaning of so many phrases.’

DI Moss and DC Haseldon knew they were being provocative, but they hadn’t expected this kind of outburst, and it was a few moments before Moss responded.

‘Good – ness – me!’ he cried in mock awe. ‘That’s quite a temper you have there, Mr. Langston.’

Tom laughed derisively. ‘You know, well done. You’ve seen through me. Case solved. I did it.’

‘Did what, Mr. Langston?’

‘Stuck Shaun Bratcher on a space shuttle to Mars, of course! I imagine that’s a pretty serious offence – kidnapping and interplanetary deportation. *Illegal* interplanetary deportation... and of a minor, actually – sorry. Should you read me my rights now?’

Haseldon was still frantically recording everything that was said on his little notepad. He clearly thought that Mr. Langston's last utterances could be vital as evidence in court. Moss looked at him, frowned and waved reprovingly at his pen. Haseldon looked at his boss like a scolded dog and quietly put his pen away, staring glumly at his notes.

'OK, Mr. Langston,' said Inspector Moss, standing up abruptly and passing Tom his card. 'Here are my contact details. Let me know straight away if you remember anything else. Thanks for your help.'

Tom took the card from the inspector's hand and flashed a fake, antagonistic grin at the dejected constable. He then marched down the corridor and across the quad toward his classroom, pupils scattering in his wake. With enough force to kill a small child, he flung the door into the wall, leaving a dent and a pile of plaster on the tiles. Directly in front of him, as the dust began to settle, Tom saw a piece of lined A4 lying in precisely the same place as the other had done before, again with a message written with a stencil in black felt tip. This time it read, "*YOU'RE DEAD – FROM SHAUN*".

Mr. Langston threw his head back and laughed maniacally. Julian heard the disturbing sound from across the path and emerged from his hut to stand at the top of the steps.

'What are you laughing at, mate?' he asked in confusion, as there appeared to be no one else around.

Tom stooped swiftly, picked up the note and stuck it in the back pocket of his trousers.

'I'm just happy, that's all, Julian. Happy, happy, happy. How are you?'

'I'm fine. We should talk about your lesson on Friday.'

Stop Talking

‘Yes, OK. It was bollocks.’

‘Well, not now! Let’s talk about it later,’ said Julian, looking around nervously for nearby pupils. Tom seemed not to hear him.

‘You know, it didn’t even begin really. I failed to get them seated or quiet, and then I swore and walked out. If it was a lesson at all, it was a lesson in how to get the sack in one easy step.’

‘Tom...’

‘I tell you what though, after I told them to stop fucking talking and fucking listen, they fucking did. Even that wretched Bratcher creature closed his cocky little trap, and you should have seen the look on Clarke’s face, she looked like she’d been raped by a rampant rhinoceros. She...’

‘Tom! For goodness sake, be quiet, will you?’ Julian implored.

Tom grinned fatuously at his HoD, who looked as if he thought Hilary might jump out at any moment.

‘Relax, Julian. You’ve resigned and I’m about as likely to make it to the end of term as a Year 11 homework diary.’

Julian crossed the way briskly and motioned Tom inside.

‘Now look,’ he said firmly, ‘I don’t know what’s got into you, but whatever plans either of us have, we must act professionally. If you get caught talking like that, particularly in light of what’s going on with Shaun Bratcher, you could get black-marked, which means you may not be able to get a teaching job again. Also, I have no intention of disclosing the fact that I’ve resigned until I have to, which will be after half-term at the earliest, and I expect you to respect that.’

‘Yeah, sorry mate, you tell people when you want to, that’s your prerogative. My prerogative, however, is to say exactly what I want, when I feel like it, and what I feel like saying now is I absolutely don’t give a

shit about anything – my job, being black-marked, and especially not Shaun Bratcher.’

Tom paused for a moment as he looked to be considering something.

‘You know what though?’ he continued more brightly, chuckling to himself as he started preparing resources. ‘I’ve got a bunch of middle-stream Year 9 bastards next, and for the first time, I’m actually looking forward to it.’

Julian scratched his head in bewilderment, continuing to stare at Tom for a moment before walking back to his classroom. He couldn’t understand what was going on with his colleague, but he largely blamed himself. The man he’d played a significant part in appointing in June was not the man with whom he had just conversed. As far as Julian was concerned, whatever had happened had happened because of Brentmouth, and there was no way he could dissociate himself from the place.

He heard laughter coming from the other side again and decided, against his moral misgivings, to spy on Mr. Langston while he lined up his class. He opened the inner door a fraction and gazed through the glass in the entrance. From this position, he could see Tom leaning insouciantly against the wooden rail of the steps, talking to himself. Whatever he was saying, he obviously found very amusing, because he kept laughing ebulliently and nodding in self-congratulation. Julian shook his head in pity and then ducked down as he heard sounds of children approaching.

A group of Year 9 pupils ambled down the path and stood in a huddle beneath the steps, sweater sleeves pulled over their hands against the damp, cold air. Small clouds of vapour appeared evanescently in front of their faces, an indication that winter was beginning to get a grip.

Stop Talking

‘What are we doing today, sir?’ aired the most popular pupil question in history.

‘Yep, got to go, mate,’ Mr. Langston answered. ‘I’ve got a class. See you later.’ He removed his earphones and stuck them in his pocket.

Julian rolled his eyes in sudden understanding and breathed a sigh of relief.

‘What are we doing today? Hmm... let’s see... as it’s the sixth lesson of the series, I think it’s about time we had a practice run-through of your blues compositions in front of the class. I may also record them so you can appraise your own performances.’

OK, thought Julian, so far so good.

‘Oh, no! Please sir!’ the girl cried. ‘Not this week – we’re not ready. We’re not going first. I don’t care, but we’re not going first!’

‘Don’t worry, Michelle, I was only joking! Who wants to do that? What I meant was we’re doing karaoke!’ Mr. Langston cheered and whooped like a Texan cowboy, removed his jacket, and whirled it around his head like a lasso.

Oh no, thought Julian, please let that be a joke too.

‘Are you all right, sir?’ Michelle’s friend asked jokingly.

‘Sir, are you feeling OK?’ asked another, touching his arm in mock concern.

‘Never felt better, Tamsin. In fact, what are we waiting for? Get your voluminous fundamentals inside and start warming up. In through the nose – out through the mouth – in through the nose – out through the mouth!’

Mr. Langston sucked in a lungful of dank air and blew it in a large misty plume above his head, while behind the door of his classroom, Julian held his head in his hands in despair.

‘You see how it’s done, girls? Nothing to it. Oi! Lads!’ Mr. Langston yelled up the slope. ‘Hurry up and get your pedestrian intellects down here! No time to waste today – we’ve got some crucial vocal and auditory learning to do!’

The last of the big, lumbering lads, somewhat bemused at the verve of their teacher’s reception, shuffled into the dirty Spartan classroom. Mr. Langston followed and, with a wild flourish, pulled the door shut resoundingly behind him. He gazed over his class as they settled, a faint, crooked smile framed by a look of undisguised condescension. As luck would have it, most of this class were overweight – some distinctly so, many wore run-of-the-mill NHS reading glasses, and nearly all wore a permanently uninspired, blank expression on their greasy, spotty, lugubrious faces. They slouched so far into their seats that it seemed as if their skeletons had turned to jelly, and some were barely visible above the desktops. He had pitied them in their first lesson and made the most common pedagogical mistake of being lenient when they failed to follow instructions. Being somewhat more intelligent than Mr. Langston had given them credit for, however, 9Y3 had since capitalised on this initial softness and now, although not as openly recalcitrant as some of his classes, produced little or no work of any quality.

The class was unusually quiet as the last pupil took a seat that morning, and then a faint, low hum started spreading through the room. Mr. Langston frowned as if trying to discern the sound before the briefest smile flickered across his face.

Stop Talking

‘What’s that?’ he asked, as the humming intensified. Mr. Langston cupped his ear and looked around him as though baffled by the source.

‘What on earth do you think that sound could be, Jack?’ he said, feeling the radiator.

‘Don’t know, sir,’ Jack replied, stifling a laugh.

‘I don’t know either,’ said Mr. Langston, cocking his head to the floor. ‘What do you think it might be, Lorna?’

‘I don’t know, sir.’

Lorna turned away from Mr. Langston, coughed indulgently, and hid her smile with her hand. ‘Sounds like it’s coming from outside, sir!’ she ventured, her voice muffled.

‘Really?’

Mr. Langston strode toward the door and down the steps. 9Y3 scraped their chairs back cautiously as they stood up to watch their teacher walking up and down the path, shrugging and looking mystified. Julian had continued spying, but he did not hear the conversation inside so had no clue what was going on. The humming stopped as pupils giggled quietly and whispered to each other about the success of their trick, but when Mr. Langston walked back up the steps, it promptly returned.

‘Hmm... sounds like it’s coming from in here to me, Lorna. I can’t understand it.’

Mr. Langston wandered about the room, giving an appearance of being totally dumbfounded, while the faces of 9Y3 disintegrated with silent hysterics whenever his back was turned. He tapped the battered tape recorder on his desk, held it up to his ear and shook it. Pushing the class’s gullibility further, he picked up a pencil sharpener and examined the mechanism. Then, still wearing an expression of exaggerated

befuddlement, he abruptly knelt down next to a large amp. Pressing his ear to the speaker, Mr. Langston slyly plugged a radio receiver into an input socket and turned the volume and gain up to max.

‘It seems to be coming from in here,’ he said, as he stood up triumphantly, slipping a radio mike up his sleeve and heaving the amp onto Lorna’s desk.

There was so much interference from the astronomical levels that Mr. Langston had set that there was indeed a gentle buzzing sound coming from the speaker. Meanwhile, from all corners of the classroom, the humming sound emanated more enthusiastically than ever as the class persisted with its auspicious prank.

‘Can you hear it, Lorna?’ asked Mr. Langston, sliding the amp closer to her.

Lorna leant theatrically toward the speaker as if listening intently. At that moment, while fiddling distractingly with a screw on the handle, Mr. Langston switched the mike on. An ear-splittingly high-pitched squealing sound blasted out of the speaker and, like a spear of lightning, tore through the brains of every child in the room. Lorna screeched and leapt like an electrified cat off her seat to the ground, where she laid whimpering and clutching her ear. Then, as quickly as the abominable noise arrived, it was gone. The humming had vanished from the air like steam, and the only sound was that of Lorna’s sobs as she slowly picked herself up.

The sky was reflecting off the windows of Mr. Langston’s hut, but Julian saw Lorna place her head next to the amp. He gasped in horror when she fell to the floor, the power and pitch of the feedback threatening to shatter the panes, but continued to watch, fascinated.

Stop 'Talking

‘What – on – earth – was – that?’ Mr. Langston bawled. ‘There are all kinds of inexplicable noises popping up in here today. You all right, Lorna? That must have given you quite a scare.’

Mr. Langston moved the amp underneath his desk and sneakily plugged it into the electric piano. With the pretence of ticking names off the register, he subtly pressed a few buttons and set it to sound effects.

‘Is Hollie here?’ he casually asked the group of slack-jawed Year 9 students. Most hadn’t got a clue what just happened, but all were astounded, and a few numbed, by their teacher’s lack of concern over Lorna’s distress and pain. She had climbed back onto her chair but was still sniffing and nursing her ear. No one answered his question. He looked up.

‘Hollie – you know, funny little eyes, buck teeth, excessively-upholstered ginga?’

‘Here, sir.’ A hand rose falteringly above the blushing features of a very self-conscious, redheaded girl.

‘There she is!’ said Mr. Langston, pointing at her with his pencil. ‘See what I mean? Now, as I said...’ He pressed a button on the piano. ‘This lesson was supposed to be a blues composition rehears... what’s – that?’

A faint humming sound pulsed from under his desk, echoing off the bare windows and walls and enveloping the cramped space before evaporating like a wisp. Mr. Langston looked around him in surprise.

‘That was that humming sound again, wasn’t it?’ he said. ‘Where do you think it’s coming from now, Lorna?’

Lorna regarded him with a look of abject betrayal, her eyes red and accusing, and her face puffy and tear-streaked. Michelle, who was

supplying her with tissues on the front row, gave Mr. Langston her most reproachful look and shielded her friend from him with a comforting arm.

‘No more bright ideas from Lorna, then,’ Mr. Langston commented, with the merest smirk. ‘What about you, Lauren?’ he asked, addressing the girl on the other side of her.

Lauren scowled at him but said nothing.

‘What, you mean to tell...’ The humming sound floated out again, cutting the uncomfortable atmosphere and causing the ceiling tiles to rattle spookily.

‘There it is again!’ cried Mr. Langston, his hand resting nonchalantly on the dynamics. ‘What on earth..?!’ his voice was drowned out as, like a swarm of bees, the humming curled around the room, growing steadily in volume until all the pupils had their hands over their ears. He flicked the switch on the mike back on and, with slick deftness, let it fall out of his sleeve into his hand.

‘Sounds like people humming, that does, don’t you think?’ Mr. Langston shouted over the top, his voice distorted with overdrive. ‘Sounds like a class of pupils playing a trick on their teacher by humming altogether so that he doesn’t know who’s doing it and can’t tell them off.’

The humming got louder.

‘Sounds like a whole bunch of kids having a laugh at their teacher’s expense to me!’ Mr. Langston screamed, as he turned everything up to max.

‘*SOUNDS LIKE FUN!!*’ Mr. Langston tipped his head back and laughed horribly, the coarse hacking sound combining terrifyingly with the insistent, deafening drone. ‘*HA – HA – HA! HA – HA – HA!*’

Stop Talking

He hit a button on the piano, and the humming was replaced by an almighty clap of thunder.

‘It’s Jesus!’ he yelled, as the ensuing rumble rolled like a massive boulder around the room. ‘There’s going to be a second coming! Quick! Look out of the window. See if you can see angels!’

Julian’s chin had been sagging lower and lower as the loudness grew so brutal that he seriously thought the kids might decide to make a run for it, and, with the homicidal laughter and the sacrilegious joke, he wondered if he should go over and tell them to do so himself. He half rose, but quickly thought better of it and sunk down again. He wasn’t just afraid for the pupils, he was afraid for himself. Apart from the fact that taking over another member of staff’s lesson was an absolute last resort and would be taken as a major affront, he was scared of upsetting Tom in the volatile condition he was in.

The deep, throaty roar of a lion followed the thunder and made everything, including the pupils, who looked as if their worlds were collapsing around them, vibrate like a washing machine. The windows shook, the ceiling tiles bounced, and the partition walls that had recently been erected to provide practice rooms, trembled as dust drizzled by their sides. Several girls screamed but were drowned by the fierce, bestial noise and Mr. Langston’s unholy braying. He let the roaring continue for a moment before delivering three ear-shattering gunshots, each seeming to lift the entire hut off its legs, and then a merciful silence followed.

‘There we go! Three shots to the head!’ said Mr. Langston cheerfully, to a mute audience. ‘Didn’t want anyone getting eaten, at least not by lions.’

A Lesson to Remember

He winked at Lauren, whose scowl had long since been wiped off her face. The tiniest scuffling noise crept along the floor and then the squeaking of hundreds of rats seemed to be coming from underneath the chairs. The screaming flared up again, and one girl panicked and stood on her chair in horror, wailing and hugging herself. Julian could stand it no longer. He took a deep breath and jogged across the way before he had time to change his mind.

‘Everything all right, Mr. Langston?’ he called out, sticking his head nervously around the doorway.

‘Absolutely fine!’ Mr. Langston yelled back. ‘They’re not going to forget this lesson in a hurry!’

Tom looked at Julian as if to say, ‘Is there anything else I can help you with?’ and his HoD reluctantly withdrew. Then his wicked grin disappeared and he cut the power. The girl standing on her chair hesitantly dismounted, and the blubbing stopped, but everyone, boys and girls alike, were stunned by their teacher’s performance. Never, in all the years they’d attended school, had they seen such a rabid, exhibitionistic and freaky display of unrelenting vindictive behaviour, imbued with such sickening callousness. And, with the squealing, the thunder, the lion’s roaring and the gunshots, all at a high enough volume to be heard halfway across the school, it was the loudest sixty seconds most of them had ever experienced. It had physically hurt.

Though the room was already silent, Mr. Langston waited, hands clasped in front of him like a sentinel, staring impassively at the back wall as though nothing had happened.

‘What’s this, George?’ he asked suddenly, holding up the microphone in the direction of his next victim.

Stop Talking

George had been steadfastly staring out of the window in disgust during the crazed display of retribution. He didn't feel in the least bit guilty that it was he who had started the humming and found the reactions of others in his group contemptible. He had not been fooled for a minute by Mr. Langston's charade and knew from the first squealing note of feedback that he must have a mike hidden somewhere. To George, it was blatantly obvious that Mr. Langston was just trying to make a point of some kind. He would show him and the rest of this class of wimps that he wasn't intimidated by some mad weirdo. He ignored the question and continued to look outside.

'George!' Mr. Langston called out again. George scrunched his eyes up against the brightness of daylight and continued to peer out of the window, foolishly blanking his teacher.

Mr. Langston switched the mike back on. '*GEORGE!!!*'

The poor reverberant little structure exploded again with the monstrous, raw noise of Mr. Langston's voice in overdrive. Every child in 9Y3, who had relaxed thinking the torture was over, jumped visibly, while the globular body of George Bottomley flinched so violently he banged his knee hard against the desk. Over the path, Julian watched the drama unfold, transfixed. He wanted to turn away but couldn't. It was like watching something going awfully wrong on live TV.

'CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW, GEORGE?' Mr. Langston bellowed, 'OR DO YOU WANT ME TO TURN IT UP A BIT?'

'No, it's aall roigh...'

'WHAT? I CAN'T HEAR YOU! SPEAK UP, LAD!'

‘NO!’ George shouted aggressively as he could, trying to hide his embarrassment from being caught flinching and the fact that his eyes were smarting from the pain.

‘GOOD!’ Mr. Langston switched off the mike. ‘What about now?’

‘Uh?’

‘Whaa’ aboat no, George, caan yo ‘ear me no?’ Mr. Langston hissed, rudely imitating George’s local accent.

‘Yeah. Oi – caan – ‘ear – yo – no,’ George replied protractedly, wishing desperately that his unstoppable teacher would pick on someone else.

‘Whaa’ aboat no, George?’ Mr. Langston whispered across the silent room. ‘Caan yo ‘ear me no?’

George looked around for help from his mates, but none of them wanted any association with him while their enlivened music teacher had this infernal fire lit beneath him. He was on his own, abandoned, and at the mercy of Mr. Langston’s inexorable attack.

‘Yeah,’ George responded less antagonistically, his face a curious picture of hate and remorse.

‘Whaa’ aboat no, George?’ Mr. Langston mouthed silently, staring balefully at his victim. ‘Caan yo ‘ear me no, George?’

A terrible hush had descended upon the room. Everyone knew they had messed about the whole term, taken their teacher’s initial tolerance for weakness, and played on it. They had been increasingly insolent and obnoxious in manner, even directly insulting at times, employing such standards as coughing expletives and shouting obscenities when out of sight. They had premeditated conniving ways of keeping from doing work that ranged from the relatively innocuous game of asking

Stop Talking

irrelevant questions about their teacher's favourite hobby to deciding that, as a class, they would persistently claim not to understand the task. Everyone knew that George had been responsible for instigating many of these ruses, but it was not whether he deserved the persecution he was getting that 9Y3 found so disturbing, it was that they had never seen a teacher so maliciously and coldly exact his revenge. They had all grown up to believe that, like their parents, teachers were different from normal people – not really human and, in this capacity as non-humans, were incapable of pure malevolence. If they punished pupils, even severely, it was understood that it was ultimately for their own good. Yet what they were witnessing, as they sat there, rigid with fear, was a teacher deriving pleasure from someone else's distress. They had caught the perverse smile cross Mr. Langston's face as he spoke to Lorna while she was traumatised and upset, and now, after making his point with George and ridiculing him, he was carrying on.

'Yeah,' George replied pitifully. 'I caan 'ear yo.'

'What, you can or you caan't, which is it George?'

'Oi caan.'

'OK,' Mr. Langston continued, turning to the class with a puzzled look. 'I think I'll just have to presume that's a yes, which is funny, as it appears the human potato has markedly better hearing than anyone else.'

He walked over to George's desk and sat on it.

'Can you hear this, George?' He leant over the wretched boy and stared chillingly into his eyes.

'You are a thick – fat – prick.' Mr. Langston again mouthed the words silently, but they were as clear as if he'd written them on his whiteboard.

There was a collective gasp as the class interpreted each word, but on the delivery of the last, the fire alarm went off. It wasn't very loud down in the music hut, but the room was so quiet, and the atmosphere so excruciatingly fraught with tension, that it pierced the consciousness of each pupil like a jolt of electricity.

Mr. Langston continued to sit on the desk with the microphone in his lap, staring at George. The only sound was the distant ringing of the school bell, and he frowned as he quickly averted his gaze. He was used to coming round to find himself staring at something, but not other people, and certainly not in the middle of a lesson.

'OK, you know the procedure. You'll have time to pick...' Mr. Langston stopped and checked his watch, realising he had no idea what the time was. '...to pick your bags up before the end.' He glanced out of the window. 'It's quite chilly today, so I advise you to take your coats with you.'

He looked around in a state of some confusion as everyone gawked at him. 9Y3 had become a wax museum; not a soul moved an inch. Tom realised he must have lapsed into some sort of deep trance, or something, because he couldn't remember for the life of him what had happened since he talked to the police. His class seemed literally frozen in time, while he had been catapulted into the future by half an hour. He tried again.

'OK, can everyone hear me? You need to...' Mr. Langston's voice was obliterated by the sound of thirty scraping chairs. No members of 9Y3 wanted their teacher to think they couldn't hear him again and weren't about to hang around to find out what he would do if he did. Before he

Stop Talking

could issue any further instructions, they executed the fastest evacuation of a classroom in the history of Brentmouth Secondary School.

Up in the main building, Julian hurried away from the south corridor fire alarm, massaging his hand where he had punched through the glass. He was going to save Tom Langston, if it was the only worthwhile thing he did before he left.

The Truth Hurts

Owing to Julian's fierce defence of his junior and prescience of the lacklustre response to the head of music job advertisement, Hilary was not as harsh in her actions over Tom's outburst and walk out as could have been expected. She called him to her office after school on Monday, having already spoken to Julian earlier in the day, and agreed that he should be closely supervised until Christmas. The Head was to observe another lesson nearer the end of term but with a different class. She would suspend disciplinary action until this time but assured both members of the music department that if significant improvement were not seen, steps would be taken to ensure that it was.

News of Shaun Bratcher's disappearance made local television by Monday evening and was the subject of much speculation around the school and the town for the next few days, but when his body was discovered down a thirty-foot crevice, it went national. The corpse had been found by a couple of young children, trespassing in some private woods near Tor Point, and must have been a deeply traumatising experience for both. It looked as though he had fallen in headfirst because

Stop Talking

his body was wedged, about two feet off the ground, between two sheer walls of rock. His face had been partially eaten by animals, and his neck was twisted grotesquely where it had snapped on impact. The coroner's report put the time of death between ten and twelve o'clock on Friday evening, and mercifully, it was thought to be instant.

When Tom first heard the news at six o'clock on Thursday evening, three hours after the finding, he was midway through a bench press at the gym. It was the tenth rep of the last set and he was struggling with it even before the reporter announced that the crime scene was near his flat. Now, distracted to say the least, he let the barbell fall back on his chest and rest there, squeezing the breath out of him with its weight. He glanced around, but no one was near, and he was loath to call out for help. Apart from the fact that he looked a bit pathetic in his predicament, he'd reduced the weight for the last set and didn't want people to think that that was all he was capable of lifting, or incapable, as it would seem. He decided to wait a few seconds, recuperate, and try again.

In the meantime, Tom twisted beneath the bar so that he could see the TV screen and watched as the camera panned down the fissure in the granite where Shaun had perished. According to the broadcast, it had happened soon after he'd seen him on Friday. Why, in God's name, couldn't he remember what had happened during those missing few minutes? It could be crucial to the investigation. On the other hand, he reflected, maybe now that it appeared that he'd fallen down the crevice as he was running through the woods in the dark, they would conclude that it was an accident and drop the case.

The Truth Hurts

Tom coughed as the barbell pressed down heavily on his chest. He drew in a deep breath, summoned up all of his remaining energy, and pushed.

‘Long time, no see,’ spoke a tall, longhaired man with an almost unintelligible Glaswegian accent, looming over him. Tom exhaled irritably and the bar fell back again. He squinted as he tried to focus on the man’s face and caught the glare of a ceiling light. The voice sounded vaguely familiar.

‘Remember me?’

The guy’s head was directly above Tom’s, but it was shutting out the light and appeared only as a silhouette framed by a golden halo of loose hair.

Tom tensed, catching the menacing tone, and then a series of unpleasant recollections tumbled into his head. This was the Scottish guy from Valbonne’s – the guy who had turned out to be Roy’s father and who could have written the note. With the barbell pinning his back on the bench, Tom suddenly felt very exposed and vulnerable and couldn’t scramble together an appropriate reply. The man sat down on an adjacent bench and leant toward him.

‘Are you having a wee bit of trouble with this?’ he asked with a disconcerting smile, resting a hand on the bar.

Tom noticed that instead of sports attire, the man was dressed in black, stained jeans, a misshapen, grubby T-shirt, and worn boots. His face was shiny, his hair dull and greasy, and he smelled pungently of sweat and beer. Tom knew he was potentially in quite a dangerous situation but was unsure what to do about it. If he tried to wriggle out from under the bar he could do himself a serious injury, yet while it lay across him, he was at the

Stop Talking

mercy of a man with whom his last contact had been a punch in the face. The odorous jock applied a little pressure on the bar, and Tom choked. Tom arched his neck in search of help but couldn't see anyone in his inverted view.

'There's no one about, pal,' said the Scot, laughing and breathing fumes in his face. 'That's how I managed to get in looking like this.'

'Sorry for punching you,' Tom wheezed.

The man laughed again. 'I'm not here because of that, you fuckin' English bastard. I'm here because you know where my son is.'

'What are you talking about?'

The man applied more pressure. 'Shaun Bratcher. You know what I'm talking about.'

Tom stared at him in confusion. 'But your name's not...'

'Bratcher?' the man interrupted, clearly enjoying the moment of enlightenment in his victim. 'Noo. I left his bitch mother years ago and she took her maiden name back. Now listen, you wanker. I know you saw Shaun on Friday night, so...'

'I didn't,' Tom interrupted, as matter-of-factly as he could. He suddenly made sense of Shaun's 'bomb' suggestion in his mnemonic lesson a couple of weeks ago.

'Yes, you fuckin' did, you liar!'

The Scot pressed down hard on the bar, causing Tom to choke again. Specks of spittle flew from his mouth, and his face reddened with exertion as he pushed against the dual force of the bar and the man's arm.

'You know how I know?' asked the Scot through chipped, gritted teeth. 'Someone I know saw you going in to talk to the police at the school and eavesdropped, so don't give me any shite or I'll roll this bar onto your

neck.’ He put his face an inch above Tom’s. ‘What have you done to him?’ he hissed. ‘Tell me where he is.’

He’s talking about Roy, Tom realised, as he remembered passing him in the corridor, and that’s why the blasted nuisance was talking to the police – he’s Shaun’s half-brother! While holding the man’s vicious glare, Tom could make out live television pictures of policemen scouring the woods in his peripheral vision. Judging by the look and smell of his aggressor, he’d been in the pub all day, and it was clear that he didn’t know Shaun’s body had been found. Maybe he’d been unreachable, or maybe they hadn’t tried – he didn’t seem the sort to foster close paternal relations, especially as he’d walked out on his family. It seemed imprudent, however, to enlighten Mr. Humphrey of the news while he had two hundred pounds crushing his rib cage.

‘I don’t what you’re talking about. I didn’t...’

The Scot snarled in frustration, stood up, and applied his full weight to the bar. ‘Tell me where he is,’ he whispered.

‘I told you – I don’t know,’ Tom gasped, unable to breathe properly as he struggled hopelessly to combat the increased burden.

The Scot suddenly stopped pushing down on the bar and heaved it forward toward Tom’s neck, but Tom was ready for this and held firm. It was much easier to prevent the bar moving sideways than lift the weight up. He decided that the only way out of the deadlock was to distract his attacker.

‘Are you the one who wrote me the death threat?’ he asked.

The man strained and grunted but didn’t answer.

Stop Talking

‘Oi! Lusten ti me yu Scotttush puss head!’ Tom shouted, doing his best to imitate the man’s accent. ‘Dud yu put a piece of peeper wuth a threat orn ut under ma door at wuk?’

‘Fuck you!’ he growled, recognising it well enough to be insulted.

‘Was it Roy? I know you’re his father.’ The pressure eased a fraction.

‘So you were that southern faggot on the phone?’

‘Yep.’

‘How the fuck should I know?’ he spat. ‘I don’t know what he gets up to. Now tell me where Shaun is before I break your fuckin’ neck!’

Throwing all his might into it this time, Mr. Humphrey heaved again and the bar slid forwards an inch. Tom’s strength was fading quickly and his breath was coming in shallow, ragged gulps. For the first time in his adult life, he thought he might die, and panic struck. A massive dose of adrenaline flowed into his blood stream, causing his entire body to shiver, and something inside him flipped.

‘Why did both of your ex-wives change their names?’ he asked, an unnatural grin spreading across his face. ‘Was it because neither of them wanted to be reminded of you?’

‘Fuck you, man!’

‘Is that why Roy and Shaun changed their names?’ Tom gurgled, the grin looking evermore grotesque as his face turned purple, and his eyes bulged out of their sockets like a cartoon character. ‘Neither of them could bear to be associated with your sorry, drunken arse?’

‘You fucker!’ the Scot panted, as he heaved the bar still closer to Tom’s neck. ‘Tell me where he is or I’ll kill you.’

The Truth Hurts

Assuming that the guy was serious and actually did manage to get the bar onto his neck, it was difficult to see how it wouldn't be a hospital bed or curtains for Tom. At around four hundred pounds, there was no way he could support the combined weight of the bar and the man in such a delicate area. At the very least his windpipe would be crushed, and with his current oxygen deficit, he would suffocate within a minute.

'Shaun's dead!' he croaked.

'What?!' Mr. Humphrey leaned closer.

Tom's words were unintelligible and froth was bubbling from between his lips.

'Shaun's dead!'

The Scot frowned, unsure he'd heard right. Taking an enormous risk, Tom removed a hand from the bar and pointed at the screen.

Fortunately for Tom, his attacker turned to see a picture of Shaun Bratcher in the backdrop of the TV studio set just as the newsreader repeated the headline that the search was finally over. In the shock of the moment, Mr. Humphrey took his weight off the bar long enough for Tom to unbalance it and send seventy pounds of plates crashing onto the man's feet. There was a crunching sound and a howl of pain as one snapped a toe, and the half-pissed jock fell backwards over the adjacent bench. Tom sat up quickly and, using the plate-free end as a pivot, pushed the other in a murderous arc over the crumpled body of his assailant. Through the gap between his legs, which were still hanging over Tom's side of the bench, the man saw the plates linger in the air for a moment before they came hurtling down toward his unprotected crotch. He screamed in anticipation of the agony of having his testicles pulverised, but, like the hand of God, the bench interrupted its fall just in time. The shaft bounced slightly,

Stop Talking

shuddered, and left the plates dangling teasingly above his mid-section like a guillotine.

Eyes narrowed, Tom gazed down at his foe as though debating whether to upend the bar, let the weights fall off and complete their passage to scrotum annihilation, or leave him lying there with a mere broken toe. The Scot was supine and defenceless on the floor, panting heavily, and he returned the gaze with a disarming mixture of fear, grief and loathing. Tom hesitated for a second, and then, to his subdued adversary's amazement and relief, picked up his towel and walked out without a word.

On the other side of the hill, less than a mile away, Roy's eyes were smouldering as he sat in front of the TV. He disliked his alcoholic father, but anyone who caused a member of his family harm still became an enemy. To him, that was the rule of blood. And because he was able, it had been incumbent on Roy to make things square. The threat he'd asked his girlfriend to deliver had been designed to scare Mr. Langston, but he hadn't planned to actually kill him. He'd toyed with the idea of setting some sort of explosive, maybe at his house or the school, but apart from the fact that following his accident the finger, as it were, would automatically be pointed at him, it was exceedingly difficult to execute. In the end, begrudgingly certain that neither he, nor any of his friends, would be willing or able to take on the athletic music teacher hand to hand, Roy had settled on throwing a brick through his window. That meagre punishment was now woefully inadequate. The announcement ricocheted around his skull, repeating itself over and over.

"The Search Is Over: Shaun Bratcher Is Dead."

The Truth Hurts

As soon as he saw the look on his face going into the police interview room at school, Roy knew that the sicko had killed his half-brother. It was as clear as if he'd told him on his way in. He grunted. Compared to what he was planning now, as he sat there, staring glassily at the screen, the former reprisal was not even worth the brick. His heart, his mind, his whole body was consumed with hatred for this man. He didn't care if he were locked up for the rest of his life; he had to get his vengeance. And when he did, it would be so sweet, so transcendently sweet, that he would be able to cherish it forever. It would nurture and feed his soul during his inevitable incarceration.

Roy shivered with pleasure at the thought of what he was going to do and a cruel smile curled his upper lip. It awed him to feel the full potential of the violence that his thantos afforded him – the terrible, intoxicating wrath that made him capable of such a deed. In his head, he pictured the final moments when he would look into the eyes of his enemy, see the terror as his victim realised he was at Roy's mercy, and revel in the submissive begging at the brink of death. Such satisfaction! It was as much as he could to stop himself going out and finding Mr. Langston on the spot.

‘Hello?’ a voice called from behind the door.

Roy swivelled on his bed, irritated at the interruption from his reveries.

‘Oh, it's you,’ he muttered, with a touch of disdain. ‘Come in!’

Aimee stepped timidly into the purple dimness and proliferation of military paraphernalia that characterised Roy's dingy bedroom and closed the door.

‘Are you OK?’

Stop Talking

Roy smiled again as he played with his pendulous wallet chain, picturing Mr. Langston grovelling in defeat.

‘I will be.’

Aimee sat down cautiously on the bed and sidled over to him.

‘What do you mean, you will be?’ She looked at him worriedly, but Roy sat there without responding, still staring pensively at the television.

‘Roy?’ Aimee faltered.

‘Don’t worry about it!’ Roy snapped. ‘It’s got nothing to do with you.’

Aimee backed off a bit and rested her cheek on her knee as she gazed at him despondently. ‘Are you upset?’

Roy looked at her as if it were suddenly she who was responsible for Shaun’s demise. ‘Am I upset?!’ he yelled, the fury and grief in his voice so tangible it seemed to electrify the air. ‘Of course I’m upset! My brother is dead! That freak fucking music teacher murdered my brother! Am I upset?!’

Roy looked out of his window, his mouth agape at his girlfriend’s stupidity, and she shrunk away to the other side of the bed in fear.

‘You mean Mr. Langston?’ she stammered, knowing she was going to get her head bitten off no matter what she came out with.

‘Yes, Mr. Langston!’ Roy screamed, picking up his BB gun and firing it at an old cushion to vent his rage. ‘Who the fuck else do you think I’m talking about?’

The news channel switched to the weather forecast, and through a plume of dust and tension, they both watched in silence for a while.

‘Tell me what you’re going to do,’ she whispered finally.

The Truth Hurts

Roy let the question hang before answering. 'I'm going to fuck him up, OK?' He peered down the sight of the gun and imagined Mr. Langston's face at the end. 'That bastard's going to get what's coming to him.'

Aimee looked at him worriedly. When Roy's friends bragged about doing something bad it was nearly always hot air, but when it was Roy, those words became a reality. And, with the motive he had, whatever he was planning was likely to have dire consequences.

'Roy,' she pleaded, dread infusing her voice. 'Just tell me what you're thinking about. I won't try and stop you, I promise.'

She searched his face for a sign that he was listening, but his eyes were fixed, unfocussed, on the space in front of him.

'Roy?' Aimee placed a hand on his arm and he flinched. 'Come on... I've done everything you've asked me to. I put that note where you said, and he *did* get it. I saw him pick it up – remember? And I spilt that drink on Mr. Keaton's jacket. That was amazing how it worked, wasn't it? We're the perfect team, aren't we? Roy?'

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she looked heart-meltingly at her idolised boyfriend for reassurance and approval. Roy rested his head on his good hand and massaged his forehead, nodding slowly. With obvious reluctance, he placed his left arm around Aimee's shoulders and pulled her to him.

'I can't believe he did this, that's all,' he admitted, genuinely incredulous. 'I mean, I knew he was violent because of what happened in the club, but I didn't think he would kill anyone – especially not a kid. He's a teacher for Christ's sake!'

'Then maybe it wasn't him,' Aimee offered hopefully.

Stop Talking

‘It was. I know it,’ Roy replied emphatically. ‘I saw him go in to talk to the police on Monday.’

‘But surely if he did do it, that would be the last thing he’d want to do?’

‘I know, but I’m telling you, I just know it was him.’

Roy stood and walked over to the window where the light was failing. ‘It sounds stupid but I could sort of see it in his eyes when I walked past him on my way out of being interviewed. Maybe he was trying to act innocent by helping out in some way, I don’t know.’

‘He may know that you are your dad’s son, if you know what I mean,’ Aimee ventured, glad that they could at last have a calm discussion.

‘What?’

‘That you’re the son of the guy he hit.’

‘How would he know that?’

‘I don’t know... records?’

‘What records?’

Roy seemed intrigued by Aimee’s line of thinking.

‘School records?’ she replied, already doubting herself.

‘Why would he look through school records?’

‘Because he might have thought that the note was connected to the club thing.’

‘Of course he would have suspected that,’ said Roy, irritation creeping back into his tone. ‘That was the whole point. He was supposed to suspect that and then get really worried about it! But that doesn’t connect my dad to me, does it?’

‘Are you sure?’

The Truth Hurts

‘They don’t have photos of your parents on file, you know, they only have photos of you. And it’s not like they would have introduced themselves to each other before they got into the fight!’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Oh, for God’s sake, Aimee!’ Roy cried in exasperation. ‘He doesn’t know his name! How could he check anything without a name?!’

‘Sorry,’ she mumbled. ‘I was just trying to be helpful.’

‘Well, don’t.’ Roy saw Aimee’s lower lip tremble, went over and stroked her hair guiltily. ‘I mean, don’t worry about it. He doesn’t know shit, which is why it’s going to come as an extra surprise when I get even.’

‘OK.’ Aimee dabbed her eyes with her sleeve and set her jaw resolutely. ‘Tell me what you’re going to do.’

Roy lay back on the bed and fixed his gaze on the ceiling’s bare purple light bulb as he laid everything out. As she listened, Aimee’s feelings were a mixture of admiration and fear for her boyfriend for what he was planning. She was besotted with Roy, especially since the accident, and had fallen into step with his blinkered, destructive mindset. She could no longer see his or her actions objectively; whatever Roy said was right, was right. That was the nature of teenage infatuation. It was the same and as powerful as religious brainwashing. In the beginning, she gave in to Roy’s ideas because it was easier than fighting them, but soon she convinced herself that she wanted to do the things they did. Now, she had lost any ability to see the irrationality, immaturity, even insanity in his mental processes, and all her powers of independent thought had gone. Roy could probably convince her to perform a double suicide with him if he so chose.

Stop Talking

Meanwhile, Julian sat at a desk in the school hall and watched the desperate-looking parents of Brentmouth School file, bewildered and bedraggled, toward the aisle of chairs that had been laid out that afternoon down the centre. On the desk were his register, a spreadsheet of grades and national curriculum levels, and a list of appointments, beside which he'd jotted a little note about who would be attending. In some cases, it was both the mother and the father, but more often it was just the mother, sometimes an older sibling, and in one case, a girl had informed Mr. Hart that she would be attending alone. He had responded by telling her that there was little point in her coming back to school on her own when she could more easily see her teachers during the day, but the suggestion was rejected on the grounds that she had nothing better to do and was going to be around anyway. When asked why that was, the girl replied that she hung around the school at the end of the day because her mum was always at work – as she would be on Parents' Evening – and she couldn't get into her house.

After a series of missed opportunities to discuss the tumultuous lesson on Monday, Julian felt apprehensive about conducting the forthcoming consultations with his junior. He had kept a wary eye on the hut opposite throughout that day, but by the time they both returned to the music rooms after the fire drill, Tom seemed perfectly normal, if a little jaded. He made eye contact with him as they passed on the path but received a blank look in return, and Julian had spent the last couple of days wondering what was wrong with the poor guy. Despite the appalling conditions, he'd started out well – especially considering his youth and inexperience – and, at times, had made Julian feel doubly useless in his failure to keep order on his side of the block. Then, day-by-day, Tom had

become progressively irascible, moody and depressed. Complaints came in that he'd been swearing at pupils. He, by all accounts, had exploded into a fit of rage in the canteen, creating utter bedlam, and he had walked out of school during a lesson observed by the Head. Julian sympathised and empathised with all of this, and an intense guilt ate away at him every single day of the week, but he couldn't come to terms with, or understand, what had happened on Monday morning. The person he'd witnessed executing that sadistic display was not Tom as he knew him. There was a mad gleam in his eye, a creepy animation in his movements, and a nasty grin on his face so unnatural that he was almost unrecognisable. If his performance in the lesson had been at all disorganised, Julian might have thought he was drunk, but if you ignored the brain-mashing volume and malicious humour, he had to admit that Mr. Langston was teaching the definitive lesson.

With a clap on the back that made Julian choke on his mouthful of coffee, Tom swung himself into the seat next to his HoD, stretched his legs out, and clasped his hands behind his head. Tom's open-necked, short-sleeved shirt and black jeans looked starkly casual beside Julian's double-breasted, dark grey suit, and he had absolutely nothing with him except an alarm clock, which he plopped on the desk in front of them.

'All right?' Tom asked cheerily.

'Um – yes,' Julian replied as he looked quizzically at Tom's contribution to the affair. 'Why have you brought an alarm clock?'

'You heard what that fat sow said in briefing this morning: be strict about keeping each appointment down to five minutes. No need for any rude interruptions now – the alarm clock will do it for you.'

Stop Talking

Tom grinned evilly and reminded Julian unnervingly of the way he'd looked in his lesson on Monday. He had been hoping to have a gentle chat with his colleague in a quiet moment between appointments, but he could already tell Tom would not be receptive.

'Good idea,' said Julian, laughing forcibly. 'But it might distract other people a tad. Let's put it away for now.'

'Whatever,' said Tom, placing it under the desk. 'What's all this bollocks you've brought?'

Julian cleared his throat. 'These are all the assessments I've done since the beginning of term, a record of past achievement, and a register of attendance.'

'Brilliant.'

'So er... what about yours?'

'I can remember all mine,' said Tom, with supreme confidence. 'How many have I got again?'

Julian sighed and looked at the appointments sheet. 'Nine from 8Y2, five from 8Y3, three from 8X3 and none from 8X4.'

'None from 8X4, eh?' Tom chortled. 'What a surprise. Do you think it may have something to do with the fucking shut up and fucking listen remark?'

'Probably a factor,' Julian conceded, 'but as you won't be dealing with anyone from that group, you don't need to think about it now.'

'We won't be dealing with anyone from any group who's actually worth seeing,' Tom observed as he perused the list. 'None of the procreators of the real arseholes are showing up.'

‘They never do,’ said Julian resignedly. ‘At a school like this, Parents’ Evenings can be one of the most pointless exercises in the teaching profession.’

Tom roved a critical eye over the hapless, beleaguered crowd assembling. It was a fairly depressing procession of shabbily dressed, lone mothers with strings of infants wailing their objection or entertaining themselves by creating havoc with dirty pushchairs. He burped the exclamation, ‘Bollocks to this!’ and transferred his attention to the list.

‘So who’s first up, let’s see, one of yours... Barbara Huxley-Davis!’ He snorted. ‘Barbara Huxley-Davis! And she’s probably got a couple of middle names. What the fuck’s she doing at this dump? She should be up at the grammar or making daisy chains in a private school somewhere, shouldn’t she?!’ Tom snorted again. ‘Barbara bloody Huxley-Davis!’

‘She transferred from the grammar because apparently she had a bad time there,’ Julian replied, with an air of admonishment.

‘Really – lesbianism?’ Tom whistled. ‘I guess some don’t take to it.’

‘Actually, I have a feeling she was bullied.’

‘Probably was – no one likes a rebel without a cause.’

‘OK, Tom,’ said Julian, seeing the Huxley-Davis’ enter the hall and wondering if it was worth asking Tom to be mindful of his tone and language. ‘Here they come. Remember to be tactful with the criticism and...’

‘Tactful with the criticism?!’ Tom repeated, laughing. ‘With a name like Barbara “My Arse Smells of Roses Huxley-Davis”, it’ll be more a case of remembering not to be too sickeningly over-complimentary.’

Stop 'Talking

‘Hello, Mr. Huxley-Davis... Hello, Mrs. Huxley-Davis,’ said Julian, smiling politely as he shook their hands. ‘No Barbara tonight?’

‘No,’ said Mr. Huxley-Davis, his set jaw and impassive expression indicating no plans for embellishment.

‘She’s got ballet from six until eight on Thursdays,’ Mrs. Huxley-Davis explained with a warm, delicate smile and nice teeth.

‘Not surprised,’ Tom remarked. ‘So who’s Huxley and who’s Davis?’

‘Oh, no!’ said Mrs. Huxley-Davis, hee-heeing. ‘We inherited the double-barrelled surname from Clive’s parents.’

Mr. Huxley-Davis failed to react in any way whatsoever to the question – even so much as to look at Tom when he opened his mouth. Instead, he chose to stare at the spreadsheet on the table as if that were the only thing of any use in the vicinity.

‘So how’s my daughter doing, Mr. Hart?’ he asked crisply.

Julian pulled the spreadsheet from under Mr. Huxley-Davis’ nose and read aloud a series of satisfactory to moderately good grades that equated to a respectable national curriculum level of 4/5.

‘She’s getting straight fives in all her other subjects,’ Mr. Huxley-Davis sniffed. ‘How do you account for that?’

Well,’ Mr. Hart began, organising his response carefully in his head. ‘Barbara doesn’t seem to be very enthusiastic about music in lessons, she often takes a back seat during group projects, and she rarely answers questions in class discussions.’

‘I’ve heard the music department’s going down the pan at the moment,’ Mr. Huxley-Davis continued accusingly, unwisely flicking a glance in Tom’s direction.

The Truth Hurts

‘Clive...’ Mrs. Huxley-Davis murmured, giggling nervously and blushing.

‘Well I can assure you that that is not the case, Mr. Huxley-Davis,’ Julian responded temperately. ‘It’s just that Barbara is...’

‘A bit crap at music,’ Tom finished. ‘You can work your tail off in most other subjects and make up for mediocrity, but in music, you’ve got to have talent. She doesn’t.’

Tom let the information sink in for a moment and then reversed the aspersions. ‘Is that why she transferred from the grammar – tried really, really hard but always fell short of her classmates?’

Julian and Mrs. Huxley-Davis gasped, while Mr. Huxley-Davis looked as if he were cooking himself.

‘She did not fall short of her classmates,’ he hissed. ‘She had a bad year, that’s all. Our daughter is an extremely bright girl and if you can’t see that it’s your fault.’

‘Maybe it’s because she’s *so* dazzlingly bright that we can’t see it,’ Tom retorted.

Mr. Huxley-Davis huffed angrily and stood, pulling his wife up with him like a bag of heavy groceries. ‘I’ve never met a teacher so damnably rude in all my life. I shall be making a formal complaint about this, you can be sure.’

‘Don’t go,’ Tom called after them, ‘you still have two minutes!’

Mr. Hart sat in his chair, dumbstruck, while Tom glanced over the list again. He scowled in obvious disappointment, seeing that it was Pippa Stewart to follow – another of Mr. Hart’s pupils from 8Y1.

Julian had just about gathered his wits enough to ask Tom if he were trying to get his revenge for all the bad lessons he’d ever had, sink

Stop Talking

the department's already crumbling reputation, or simply get the sack, when Mrs. Stewart appeared with her daughter and sat down.

'Hello,' she greeted the pair breezily. 'How are you, Mr. Hart?'

Mr. Hart cleared his throat. 'I'm er... I'm fine, thank you. Mrs. um...'

'Stewart,' Tom cut in.

'Oh, hello!' Mrs. Stewart chirped. 'You must be the new music teacher.'

'I teach old music as well,' said Tom, eyes glittering, 'but yes, I am.'

Mrs. Stewart's brow knitted, and then she laughed like a high-pitched car alarm. 'I can see why they appointed you!' she screeched between the laughter and the painful-sounding intakes of breath. 'Sense of humour!'

'They told me it was because I play the one-string bass,' Tom replied, a leer escaping across his cheek. Julian groaned inwardly at the sexual symbolism and studied the spreadsheet in embarrassment.

'Do you?' she asked innocently.

'Yes. I played them an energetic piece in the interview and it got faster and faster and louder and louder until...'

'Aaah!' Julian yelled, clutching his leg.

'It was a bit like that, actually,' Tom commented as he looked down at his HoD rubbing his shin.

'What's the matter?' Tom asked in mock concern, knowing that Julian was faking it to distract Mrs. Stewart. 'You OK?'

'Yeah – I just hit my shin against the desk.'

'Would you like an aspirin, or is it more serious than that?'

The Truth Hurts

‘No, I’m fine,’ said Julian, doing an admirable job of gritting his teeth and wincing.

‘Well,’ said Mrs. Stewart, somewhat mystified at the interruption, ‘I’ve never seen a one-string bass, but I’m sure it’s a beautiful instrument.’

She looked from one teacher to the other with an uncertain smile.

‘It certainly is, Mrs. Stewart,’ said Tom, with horrible sweetness. ‘Although it is generally agreed that the bigger ones are better, and I bet you’ve seen quite a few in your lifetime.’

Julian was trying so desperately not to squirm in his seat that he let wind with a tiny squeal that left no doubt whatsoever of its nature and origin. Only Mrs. Stewart and Mr. Langston had licence to speak after such a classic faux pas, and Tom seemed to be enjoying the excruciating tension it had created.

‘Do you play any other instruments?’ asked Mrs. Stewart, when she could bear it no longer.

‘Sometimes I get the horn,’ Tom declared.

‘Excuse me?!’ Mrs. Stewart choked. She fidgeted awkwardly in her seat as she tried unsuccessfully to cover her tentative smile and burning cheeks with a dainty little hand.

‘Out,’ Tom finished, looking at Mrs. Stewart with an expression of irritable incomprehension. With a flush that ascended all the way to her hairline, she pretended to study avidly the documents on the desk.

‘OK, shall we have a look at her grades?’ Julian interjected, overcoming his embarrassment through his desire to save the poor woman from any further innuendos. He knew by now that Tom was on something. He not only seemed to have no appreciation of the delicacy with which one had to feed parents the truth about their children but also had lost all

Stop Talking

sense of perspective about what kind of humour was permissible. He held the spreadsheet out to a grateful Mrs. Stewart, who was beginning to wonder if the whole evening was a set up for Candid Camera.

‘Of course what really clinched it,’ Tom interrupted, still deadpan, ‘was when I started playing the trombone with the music advisor.’

‘Did it?’ Mrs. Stewart replied miserably.

‘All that sliding in and out... and there was a really angular, polyphonic countermelody that required us to play around with each other’s parts a lot before the climax...’

The evening became an endless, prurient hell for Julian as he tried to engage sensibly with parents while suffering the acute discomfort of being an associate of his junior, and Tom continued to exploit every opportunity to entertain himself. Short gaps cropped up between slots from time to time, but there were so many things Julian wanted to bring up with his colleague that there seemed little point in sparking up a discussion about them then.

Pete and Jim were stationed on the opposite side of the hall, trying to communicate with their friend semaphorically without success. In the end, Jim sent over one of the tea boys with a note saying that Shaun Bratcher had been found dead near his house. Tom wrote one back saying he’d seen the tragedy on the news and that the lad was a shining member of society and would be sorely missed. Jim chuckled dutifully at the sarcasm when he read the reply, but there was no lustre in it. Even he thought that a joke like that, so soon after the boy’s death, was a bit distasteful.

The last parent was one of the few whose offspring had caused innumerable problems that term for all teachers, and being at the end of the

The Truth Hurts

evening, Julian anticipated she would likely turn up angry, embarrassed and upset – particularly as he'd already spotted her reprobate son in tow.

‘Hello,’ she rasped as they came over, the skin around her thin lips yellow from tar and wrinkled like a walnut.

She stared at Julian with the same belligerent squint as her son, but she lacked the infuriating, cheeky grin he always adopted during confrontations. Tom glanced at the irksome child and could see it lying in wait at the corners of his mouth, despite the contrived look of boredom, as he awaited the verdict.

‘Hello,’ Julian replied in a tired monotone. ‘With considerable apprehension I will defer to my colleague, Mr. Langston, who has had the pleasure of Ben’s company since the beginning of Year 8.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Wood,’ Tom began cordially. ‘How has the evening been so far?’

‘All right,’ she replied with indifference.

‘Really?’ asked Tom, raising an eyebrow. ‘No complaints about his behaviour or anything?’

‘A couple of them said it could be improved,’ she admitted, as if it were barely worth mentioning, ‘but otherwise he’s doing all right, they said.’

‘Did they?’ said Tom, frowning and nodding his head.

‘Yeah.’

Mrs. Wood looked at him with the faintest expression of puzzlement, and a tiny smirk widened Ben’s mouth ever so slightly. Mr. Hart anticipated what was coming and scrunched his face up in preparation.

Stop Talking

‘I see. Then it will come as a surprise for you to learn that your son is one of the most contumacious, malicious, obnoxious pupils with whom I have ever had the misfortune to share breathing space.’

‘Is that good?’ asked Mrs. Wood, giving no obvious sign she was joking.

Tom’s eyes narrowed as though unsure whether he’d heard correctly. ‘Is that good?’ he repeated, brow furrowed.

Mrs. Wood simply stared at him silently with her pinched, birdseed eyes.

‘No, Mrs. Wood, it isn’t,’ said Tom, after an uncomfortable pause. ‘Let me put it another way: Ben is an awkward, nasty, smelly little boy.’

‘You can’t say that,’ she responded matter-of-factly, as if it were against the rules of some board game they were playing.

‘If every other member of staff in this room had the balls,’ said Tom, looking around superciliously, ‘they would have said it too.’

‘They said he was all right,’ she objected.

‘They were lying, Mrs. Wood. Let me illuminate some stock Parents’ Evening phrases for you. “He could do better” means “He’s not doing very well”. “He struggles with some of the concepts” means “He’s not very clever”. “He’s a bit talkative” means “He never shuts up”. “He could listen more attentively” means “It would be nice if he ever listened”. “He could be more organised” means “He’s always late, he never brings the right equipment, and his school shoes seem permanently to be at home in the wash”. “He’s a lively boy” means “He’s a royal pain in the arse” and “His behaviour could be improved” means “If I knew I would get away with it, I’d cheerfully hang him up with piano wire and beat him around the head with a mallet”. Now you tell me...’ Mr. Langston leant forward

The Truth Hurts

and interlocked his fingers on the desk between them. ‘...Do you think he’s really doing all right?’

Considering how unaccustomed she must be to hearing a teacher speak his mind so plainly, Mrs. Wood did a fine job of remaining unflustered. Her gaze never left Mr. Langston during his entire vitriolic condemnation, and her expression remained stoic. Ben, on the other hand, had melted like hot wax into his chair, and his shaved pinhead now barely appeared above the tabletop. Mrs. Wood finally lifted her gaze from Tom and turned it toward her son.

‘Are you really doing all right, Ben?’ she asked simply.

‘No,’ he mumbled into his collarbone.

‘Well thanks for being honest, Mr. whatever-your-name-is, but my son isn’t smelly and you shouldn’t have said so.’

‘Sorry,’ Tom replied, with surprising sincerity.

Mrs. Wood glared at him for a moment longer, and then rose, dragging her son with her by his shirt collar and clipping him around the ear as they exited the building. Julian sat staring into space as though lobotomised, while Tom watched the last of the parents shuffle out of the hall.

‘How’s your leg?’ he asked teasingly.

‘Fine.’

‘You heard Shaun Bratcher’s dead?’

Julian looked at him as dispassionately and dully as if he’d asked him if he’d heard that Brentmouth United had lost to Plymouth.

‘No,’ he replied.

‘Yep.’

Action at the Indian

The atmosphere in the staffroom the next morning was sombre. Everybody had seen the news the previous evening, and despite the gradual diminishment of hope for his being found alive, it still came as a shock to hear the newsreader say the words “Shaun Bratcher is dead”. The fact that it appeared he might have been murdered only darkened the mood further.

Hilary brought up the rear of the string of grave-looking senior management and, in even, measured tones, delivered the news and repeated her plea for anyone with any information to come to see her. She left a contact number for Inspector Moss on the notice board and assured everyone again that any information given would be treated confidentially.

Tom’s lesson with 8X4 that afternoon was the best so far in the term and it clawed his insides with shame that the phrase, ‘Every cloud has a silver lining’ occurred to him as pupils completed the task. It was true that most of the kids were downbeat and one or two of Shaun’s friends were away, but for Tom, it served as proof that pupils like him act as catalysts in a highly reactive compound. You take the catalyst away and

suddenly, although potential trouble still exists, the mixture just doesn't seem to explode.

As he jogged back to his flat after basketball, Tom replayed the assault in the gym again in his head. That bloke must have counted his lucky stars when he saw him lying helplessly beneath the barbell. He wondered what the drunken idiot had planned to do otherwise, and how did he know he was there? The last thing he could remember was gasping for oxygen as the Scot tried to heave the bar onto his neck and feeling a wave of panic rise up within him. He'd since struggled unsuccessfully to recall what happened afterwards and was growing increasingly concerned about his memory lapses. He'd awoken at daybreak to find himself on the living room floor, still in his work attire. Tom wanted to talk to someone about it, but with the death of one of his pupils haunting the town, decided it was too risky. He was also worried about what had happened at Parents' Evening. That was assuming he'd turned up, of course; none of the kids in Year 8 had said anything to him about it. In fact, he reflected, the whole afternoon had been unusually, almost eerily quiet. He'd caught strange looks from Julian since the episode on Monday, but today, his HoD had avoided him completely.

Tom rounded the bend in the road at the base of the last rise to Tor Point and turned his attention to Mr. Humphrey. Sod it, he thought. He must ultimately have handled that situation, at least, pretty well to escape unhurt. If he had hurt the Scot in the process, maybe he would think twice about seeking retribution in the future. At the same time, Tom felt sorry for the man. He was clearly degenerate and therefore belonged in the town, but he obviously had feelings for his son and, despite the imprudence of his actions that afternoon, had acted upon them anyway. Maybe the

Stop Talking

alcohol had fuelled both his bravado and his sense of paternalism, and the whole thing wasn't premeditated at all. He could have just seen him walk into the gym and waited until he thought his son's kidnapper would be tired.

To Tom's dismay, when he got home, Inspector Moss and Detective Constable Haseldon were waiting for him at the front door of his building.

'Good afternoon, sir,' Moss greeted him cordially, an ingratiating smile belying the nature of the call.

'Afternoon,' Tom replied a little more coolly, conscious of his memory loss in the interview and aware that their last encounter had been far from genial.

'We'd like to ask you some questions, if we may.'

A bit more bloody polite this time, Tom thought, as the detectives stood aside to let him unlock the door.

'No problem,' he said, ushering them in.

Tom occupied himself making tea as the two large policemen made themselves comfortable on the sofa.

'Are you aware that Shaun's body was discovered down a crevice in the woods next to Rose Park yesterday, Mr. Langston?' Moss began, as if asking him if he were aware that there was a road block in a country lane up in Wales.

'Yes,' Tom answered blithely from the kitchen.

'And that the time of death has been put at between ten and twelve o' clock on Friday evening last week?'

'Yes.'

'So it would appear that you saw him right before he died.'

‘Yes.’

‘We are treating his death as suspicious. Did you know that?’

‘No.’

In an attempt to disguise his nerves, Tom called out each of his monosyllabic replies at the same flat pitch to give the impression that he was bored by each question.

‘Do *you* think his death is suspicious, Mr. Langston?’

Here we go again, Tom thought, the same old provocative, woefully transparent questions designed to elicit some sort of self-damning remark.

Tom filled the kettle and stood in the doorway. ‘No, I don’t.’

‘And why is that, if you don’t mind me asking?’

‘You already have, but never mind – I don’t mind at all. I think he fell down the fissure because he was running through the woods in the dark.’

‘You don’t think that’s odd?’ Moss asked, bunching his lips and blowing his cheeks out.

‘What do you mean?’

Tom returned to the kitchen where he threw tea bags at the mugs and got one on the floor. He used it to remove a stain on the tiles and then dumped it into the one for the inspector.

‘That he should be running through woods in the dark?’ Moss continued.

‘No,’ Tom answered, the monotone returning.

‘You don’t think he might have been scared of say...’ the inspector paused as if struggling to think of an example, ‘...bumping into trees?’

Stop Talking

‘Well, he wasn’t very bright.’ Now it was Tom who was being provocative.

‘Yes, I remember you saying so when we last chatted,’ said Moss, refusing to rise to the bait. ‘That interview didn’t go too well, did it?’

Glugging noisily from the milk carton, Tom ignored the question.

‘You don’t think it went very well, do you, Detective Constable Haseldon?’ The inspector turned to his sidekick.

‘No, sir.’ Haseldon responded obediently.

‘You were offended by Mr. Langston, weren’t you?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Three bags of obsequious parrot responses full sir, Tom thought, smiling as he noticed ants in the sugar he was about to serve the constable.

‘Poor Detective Constable Haseldon was quite upset by what you said, Mr. Langston, particularly toward the end.’ Moss’s tone became regretful. ‘That interview didn’t go well at all, so it didn’t.’

Tom wished they wouldn’t keep using his name in that irritating, patronising manner, and he hoped fervently that they would move off the subject of their last meeting in case he inadvertently revealed that he couldn’t remember the last part of it. He vaguely recalled saying something about getting rid of Shaun, but after that, he found himself staring at George Bottomley in his classroom with the fire alarm going off in the distance.

‘No,’ Tom agreed, pouring boiling water from the kettle into the mugs until they were half-full and then finishing the job off from the cold tap. ‘I seem to recall that I came along to help out with the enquiries and instantly became a suspect.’

‘Oh, you weren’t a suspect, Mr. Langston!’ the inspector replied, boggle-eyed as he emitted a long, drawn-out whistle. ‘You should see us when we *are* talking to a suspect!’

Moss guffawed heartily and nodded at Haseldon to do the same. The ageing inspector’s creased, choppy features were focussed on Tom, while the character-free detective, laughing vacantly the way people do when they have no sense of humour, watched his boss to ensure they ended simultaneously. Tom smiled politely and made a theatre of checking his watch.

‘Anyway, I’m meeting friends shortly for a drink,’ he said, handing the teas out. ‘You don’t mind if I go and change, do you? I can hear you from the bedroom.’

‘It’s just that you seemed to lose your temper with Detective Constable Haseldon when all he was doing was trying to clarify what you were saying,’ the inspector persisted, holding his hand up to indicate that Tom should stay.

Tom fought to recall what that was but it was useless.

‘Well, I’m sorry if I offended you,’ Tom apologised, doing his best to put on a sincere expression as he addressed the detective. ‘Now, if that’s all...’

Tom moved hesitantly toward the corridor but neither man moved.

‘Do you think Shaun was running through the woods because he was afraid of something, Mr. Langston?’ asked the inspector, leaning back on the sofa as though making to settle in for a while.

Tom almost said, “Like what?” before the direction in which they were heading became abundantly clear.

‘Oh!’ Tom rolled his eyes. ‘You think he was afraid of me!’

Stop Talking

‘Possibly.’

‘OK – if it was me, why didn’t he stop before he got to the crevice?’

‘Well, that is a good question and, indeed, the very one I’ve been asking myself.’ Moss almost sounded sincere as he crossed his legs and wagged his finger at the figure poised in mid-walk. ‘You see, when his body was pulled out of the crevice, where it had been wedged for six days, mauled by animals and infested with maggots, it was covered in cuts and grazes as if he’d been caught by branches and undergrowth as he ran. Strikes me he was running away from something.’

‘Yes – me.’ Tom frowned impatiently. ‘I thought we’d established that.’

‘Something that was chasing him.’

‘So you’re suggesting that I was chasing him?’

‘Possibly.’

‘Why would I do that?’ Tom was genuinely puzzled by this theory.

‘Well you do have a temper on you, if you don’t mind me saying...’

‘Again, you already... doesn’t matter.’

‘You do have a temper on you and I, sorry, *we* – Detective Constable Haseldon thought of it as well – wondered whether maybe he upset you in some way, and you thought you would get him back. Dark night, no one about, your word against his, you know...’

‘Amazing!’ said Tom, shaking his head in disbelief. ‘Then how come I haven’t got any cuts and grazes?’

‘Haven’t you?’ Moss challenged.

‘Do you want me to show you?’ Tom relaxed out of his walking pose and made as if to remove his shirt.

‘We’d like you to come down to the station so we can take some photos,’ said Moss, finally getting to the reason for their visit and pushing himself to his feet. ‘And we’d like you to give us a sample of your DNA to help us eliminate you from our enquiries.’

‘What, now?’ Tom asked in dismay.

‘Yes. It shouldn’t take long.’

‘Can I refuse?’

‘Yes, but we don’t want to have to arrest you.’ Moss gave him a warning look as if to say, ‘Just listen to me this time’.

Tom showered and changed and walked with the policemen down to the station, which was a convenient couple of hundred yards from his flat. The process took far longer than they implied, however, and by the time Tom arrived at the Indian to meet Jim and Pete, the disgruntled-looking pair had been there for half an hour.

‘Where in hell’s name have you been?’ asked Jim. ‘Thought we said half-seven?’

‘Sorry,’ said Tom, breaking off a bit of poppadom and dipping it in the mango chutney. ‘I would have phoned you but there was no reception at the police station.’

‘What?’

‘They think I had something to do with Shaun Bratcher’s death.’

‘What?!’ Jim and Pete exploded in unison.

‘Why?’ asked Pete.

‘Well, I don’t need to tell either of you that this is between us...’

Stop Talking

They both waved their hands dismissively at the suggestion that they would divulge such sensitive information.

‘But I saw him on Friday night.’

‘You did?!’ Pete asked loudly, and then checked himself. ‘You did?’ he whispered. ‘Where?’

‘On my way home,’ Tom began quietly, ‘I decided to take a different route because there was a load of kids hanging around next to the church on the high street, and I didn’t want to get asked any more questions. I went alongside the park...’

‘Rose Park?’ Jim interrupted.

‘Yep, and I don’t know if you know the steps that lead up to the top of the hill?’

‘Yeah, sort of...’ Jim nodded vaguely.

‘He was hiding behind the wall to the left of the steps where the woods are. He shouted at me and ran off – presumably to where the crevice in the rocks is – and then, as you know, fell in it.’

‘Jesus!’ Pete exclaimed.

‘Bugger me, mate!’ said Jim, all kinds of questions forming in his head. ‘So they know you saw him?’

‘Yes.’

‘How?’

‘Because I went and told them on Monday.’

‘Why?’ asked Jim, with a certain amount of comradely disapproval.

‘Because I thought it may help in finding him.’

‘It obviously did!’

‘The body was found by kids, actually,’ Tom corrected ruefully, the fruitlessness and self-detriment of the outcome of his actions apparent.

‘Oh yeah,’ said Pete, recalling the BBC broadcast. ‘You would have thought the police would have found him after what you told them.’

‘Well, yes. Except that the crevice is quite a long way into the woods from the steps,’ Tom pointed out. ‘I suppose they thought that if he’d had an accident whilst running away from there, he would have been found closer to where I saw him.’

‘So... hang on...’ Jim seemed confused. ‘You went and told them you saw him, and then what?’

‘They treated me as though I were a suspect and talked in that stereotypical copper parlance – you know, stuff like, they asked me what my name *might* be instead of simply asking me what it is.’

Pete and Jim grunted their agreement.

‘I said, “It might be Tom Langston”. For the effect the comment seemed to have on the interview, I may as well have said, “It might be Tom ‘The Slayer’ Langston!”’

Both laughed at the joke, but the humour was short-lived.

‘OK. What else did they say?’ asked Pete, eager to move the story on.

‘Nothing very much. I told them what I told you, and they kept trying to trip me up so that I would implicate myself. I didn’t, obviously, because I told them the truth. Since then, I haven’t heard anything... until just now.’

‘Carry on,’ said Pete, a picture of intrigue.

‘They are treating the death as suspicious, primarily because they found cuts and grazes on Shaun’s body where they presume he bashed into

Stop Talking

things as he was running.’ Tom hesitated. ‘They think he was running away from something.’

‘Well you then,’ said Pete, with the same sort of perplexity that Tom received the theory. ‘You already told them that.’

‘Yeah, but they think I was *chasing* him,’ said Tom, getting to the point. ‘That’s why he ran as far as he did, despite the fact that he was hurting himself, through the woods, in the dark!’

Pete and Jim sat there, expressionless, in silence, evidently seeing the logic in this theory but neither wishing it to be obvious.

‘What did they want from you at the station?’ Pete asked finally.

‘A sample of DNA, which they took from the inside of my mouth, and some pictures of my face, torso and legs as evidence of whether I have any cuts anywhere.’

The unutterable question hung in the air, and Tom waited, aware of their dilemma and smiling as he enjoyed their indecision and the tension at the table.

‘Have you ordered yet?’ he asked casually.

‘Er... no, we were waiting for you...’ Jim replied, slowly tearing a cardboard coaster to pieces.

‘Cheers,’ said Tom brightly. ‘What’s everybody having?’

‘Um, dunno. So er...’ Jim faltered.

‘Yes, mate?’ Tom cupped his hand to his ear and leant toward him.

‘So er...’ Jim coughed. ‘You haven’t got any er...’

‘What?’

Jim’s eyes were glued to the menu as he was fumbling with the question, and he didn’t catch Tom’s smile.

‘You know, you haven’t got any...’

‘Money? No, actually. I was hoping you would pay for me.’

‘Yeah, sure,’ said Jim, his mind clearly elsewhere, awkwardness assailing every word. ‘No, I meant you haven’t got any...’

‘Warts on my balls?’ Tom interrupted. ‘No. Glad to say I haven’t been anywhere near your ex-girlfriend.’

Jim looked up, caught Tom grinning and relaxed.

‘You can ask, mate,’ Tom said robustly, but there was a touch of sadness in his eyes.

‘No, I wasn’t saying that...’

‘I haven’t got any cuts, Jim,’ Tom interrupted. ‘You know why? I wasn’t running through the bloody woods chasing a little boy.’

‘Yeah, no – course not. I didn’t mean... I was just wondering if you had any from football or basketball or something,’ Jim stammered, as indignantly as he could.

The waiter came over and each ordered the same dish as always: Pete a jalfrezi, Jim a dhansak, and Tom a madras. They went for pilau rice and peshwari naan to share and ordered a fresh pitcher of Kingfisher beer. It was the perfect way to start the weekend, and the thought of it put everyone, including Tom, in a better mood.

Tom proceeded to recount the gym incident, with a little exaggeration about the weight on the bar and the length of the ordeal, and took great pleasure in the looks of total captivation on the faces of his two friends. Mind you, he realised, ignoring the fictitious ending involving a heroic feat of strength and a cool exit, it *was* a pretty good story. How often does someone try to kill you, after all?

Stop Talking

‘I don’t believe you,’ Jim stated in a way that meant he did but found it hard.

‘That – is – amazing,’ said Pete with funny, staccato punctuation, leaning back in his seat and regarding Tom in fascination. He’d never known someone have such an eventful life. ‘It would be worth getting attacked like that just so you could tell the tale.’

‘Given the way it ended up, yes,’ Tom agreed, over-pointedly.

‘So Shaun is Roy’s half-brother,’ Jim mused. ‘You never would have guessed it – they don’t look in the least bit alike.’

‘Alike in that they are both shit heads,’ said Pete. ‘Sorry – were.’

‘Why was Mr. Humphries, or whatever his name is, so convinced you knew where Shaun was, again?’ Jim asked.

Tom looked at him and frowned. ‘Humphrey,’ he corrected. ‘Because Roy relayed what I said to the police. I knew I saw something out of the window,’ he added, half to himself.

‘OK, that’s what it was,’ said Jim, doubtfully.

‘What?’ Tom asked, an edge creeping into his voice.

‘Nothing.’ Jim played with the dismembered coaster. ‘I just couldn’t remember what you’d said, that’s all.’

Tom stared at him, but Jim refused to return his gaze.

‘You think I’m not telling you something, don’t you?’

‘No mate, not at all. But it does seem...’

‘What?’

‘It seems strange that he should be so certain that you did it, even if he did know you’d seen him that night.’

‘What about you?’ Tom asked with an unpleasant smile. ‘How certain are you?’

‘Hey, come on,’ Pete intervened, disliking the ugly turn in the conversation. ‘No one’s suggesting you had anything to do with it. It just seems a little bit odd that he was *so* certain *and* the police seem to think you are involved in som...’

‘Well you can add whoever the fuck it is who’s writing the notes!’ Tom shouted. ‘I got another one this week. It said, “You’re dead from Shaun”. Seeing as Shaun was stuck headfirst down a thirty-foot hole at the time, and Jim said it definitely wasn’t Roy, there’s someone else who clearly thinks I like killing children!’

‘Tom..!’ Jim whispered, seeing people in the restaurant look over. ‘Keep your voice down, mate!’

‘You got another note?!’ Pete whispered.

‘Yes!’ Tom replied more quietly but still smouldering.

‘Shit, sorry! When – this week?’

‘Don’t know. I just found it in my trouser pocket on Tuesday.’

‘Your trouser pocket?’ Pete repeated, frowning.

‘Yes.’ Tom realised how this must sound and tried to think of an explanation.

‘How did someone get it into your pocket without you noticing?’ Pete asked, finding it difficult to believe that any pupil would have the nerve to stick their hand in Tom’s trousers while he was wearing them.

‘Don’t know.’

‘Are you sure you didn’t put it there?’

‘I think I’d remember putting a note containing a bloody death threat in my pocket, don’t you?!’ said Tom, feeling the pressure mount.

Stop Talking

‘Yes, of course, but it’s a reasonable question, mate,’ Jim countered in Pete’s defence, still upset by Tom’s reaction. ‘Don’t get pissed off just because we’re thinking this through with you.’

‘I’m not getting pissed off because of that,’ Tom responded angrily. ‘I’m getting pissed off because it sounds like you both doubt me.’

‘We don’t doubt...’ Jim began.

‘What’s this “We” all of a sudden?’ Tom snapped, raising his voice again. ‘Are there only two entities now? You two and me?’

‘I don’t doubt that you are telling us the truth, mate,’ said Jim hastily, trying to placate his friend before they were asked to leave, ‘I really don’t. But there are some things in what you’ve told us that don’t make sense. If we... if *I* didn’t tell you I thought that, I wouldn’t be being honest with you, would I?’

Tom ignored the question and poured himself another glass of Kingfisher.

‘I know you didn’t have anything to do with what happened to Shaun Bratcher, mate,’ Pete stated emphatically, trying to restore Tom’s faith in them. ‘I’m sorry if it came across the wrong way.’

‘Yeah, me too,’ Jim agreed. ‘Come on, let’s talk about something else – it’s Friday night, for God’s sake – let’s talk about Japanese women’s mud-wrestling or something!’

‘Oi!’ A gruff voice laden with dangerous undertones cut through their conversation.

The three of them turned in the direction of the sound and saw a group of men sitting at an adjacent table, staring over aggressively.

‘You teach at that school up the road where that lad died, don’t you?’ growled an ogre of a man with a bald, shaved head and rolls of fat at the back of his trunk neck.

Although the ogre looked older, Tom extrapolated from the juvenile delinquent appearance of his friends that he was about thirty years of age. His bulging barrel torso was twisted around in the frail wicker chair and barely contained inside a straining football shirt. Two beefy forearms were folded over the flimsy, creaking back, which looked ready to split asunder, and on his hands, the man wore two huge sovereign rings. Across each of the knuckles, the words ‘LOVE/HATE’ were tattooed in faded black ink. From his sandpaper skin and battered, broken, facial features to the gold tooth inside his ugly, gaping maw, every feature of this monster’s face spoke of violence. Viciousness emanated from him like a horrible aura that spread fear through the air like a poisonous gas.

The teachers stared back at the table of yobs, but no one answered.

‘Are you deaf or something?’ the man spat. ‘You teach at that shit hole, Brentmouth, don’t you? Are you that nonce who’s being questioned by the pigs?’ he asked, directing his abuse at Tom. ‘Might have known it would be one of his fucking teachers. All fucking perverts. Did you fancy a bit, eh? Are you a fucking paedophile?’

The others in the group were similarly dressed in football club paraphernalia but were considerably younger. They were chavs, townies – that nasty crowd who flunk their GCSEs and spend their late teens and early twenties hanging around street corners getting pissed, selling drugs, snatching handbags and bullying college boys. They fitted the bill of archetypal football hooligans and, behind the intimidating hulk of this deplorable beast, were quite obviously trying to incite trouble – the

Stop Talking

overheard conversation about Shaun Bratcher was just an excuse. Pete and Jim held the gaze of the leader but inside were nauseous with fear. They had both encountered groups like this before, especially in Brentmouth, and seen the sort of thing of which they were capable. If the scene played out as the jobs intended, they would take the fight into the street and beat them unconscious.

‘Let’s go,’ Jim muttered under his breath.

‘Yes. We can come back and pay later,’ Pete agreed.

‘No.’ Tom stood, winked at his friends, and beckoned to the ogre. ‘Just you,’ he said calmly, and walked toward the door.

The man hesitated for a second, aware that he was leaving the safety of his clan, then heaved his great bulk off the groaning chair and followed. Tom stopped just inside the entrance to the restaurant and waited there with his hands in his pockets, a strange half-smile on his lips. The giant lumbered over to him where he towered threateningly over his head like a different species. Tom, smile intact, seemed unfazed by the mismatch.

‘I know you and your boys are looking for trouble, so listen to me carefully when I say this,’ Tom began quietly, every word enunciated and laden with pernicious meaning. He saw the tiniest flicker of self-doubt cross the man’s face. ‘You’re right – I did kill that boy. I carried him to the edge of a thirty-foot chasm and dropped him down it headfirst. I did it because when I get angry, I have absolutely no regard for human life – including my own.’

Tom swiftly drew a cutlery knife out of his pocket and held it to the man’s throat so it looked as though he were gripping his neck in a

soldierly embrace. The giant felt the cold steel against his skin and stiffened.

‘You get your boys down here and we’ll take this outside if you want,’ Tom hissed, still boring holes into the other man’s eyes. ‘I will put this knife through your throat first and then hurt as many people as I can, as badly as I can, until I can no longer move. Or you can take yourself and your pathetic little group out of here and hope to God you never see me again.’

The big meathead stood in front of Tom, his head lowered like a bull and his flattened, boxer’s nose an inch from that of the dwarfed teacher. He looked chillingly brutal and big enough to throw Tom bodily into the road from where they stood, but the flabbergasted gorilla was rooted to the spot. He had never in his life heard such a cold and callous admission of something so evil, and he was stunned by this teacher’s complete absence of fear, or even concern, at the prospect of violence. The indifference was in his eyes, his voice, his expression, even his stance. He was used to people, even tough, street-savvy men, quaking when he squared up to them, but this fellow, even though he knew what would happen if he stood up to the hooligans, evidently cared not the tiniest bit.

Without the fear factor, all of the marked physical inequalities were irrelevant, and internally, the ogre folded like a stack of cards. Faced with the unaccustomed prospect of getting hurt, the twenty-stone coward was no longer interested. He had to find a way out of this. If he walked away from the psychopath he would lose respect from his mob, but if he didn’t, he was certain to be stabbed – perhaps fatally. All his confidence had drained away in the space of a few seconds, and he now felt dread grip his stomach so tightly that it made him want to throw up. His legs

Stop Talking

weakened, and he lurched slightly as he tried to maintain Tom's unfaltering stare.

Seeing the tacit answer in the man's eyes, Tom released him from their standoff and walked back to the table to find Jim and Pete grey-faced and wide-eyed. At the entrance, the humiliated giant, unable to speak, motioned to the football louts to leave and they, discomfited without their leader, rose and followed.

'What happened?' asked Pete quietly. He had watched Tom talking to the leader of the hooligans, certain they were about to get a serious kicking and all the while wrestled with himself over whether he should follow – positive about what would happen – and yet acutely conscious of the guilt that would haunt him if he did not. He decided to wait until Tom made a move before doing anything himself, so it was with immense relief that he now saw the gargantuan oaf, and his following of scum, disappearing across the road.

'I told him he could either take himself and his tribe of twats elsewhere, or I would put him in hospital.'

'You said what?!' asked Pete rhetorically, in astonishment. Tom munched on a poppadom and cast an eye over the clientele.

'Tom!' Pete couldn't believe his ears. Jim was still gawping in awe at the swing doors of the entrance. 'You said that?!'

'With a bit more embellishment, but yes.'

Tom sniffed distractedly, drained his beer and refilled his glass.

'He believed you?' asked Pete, wondering if Tom were winding him up and they were all invited to a brawl to the death down at the sea front.

‘I took this in case he didn’t.’ Tom slipped out the knife he held in his hand and laid it back on the table.

‘Je...’ Pete spluttered. ‘Tom!’

The appearance of the knife snapped Jim out of his trance and they both looked at it in horror while Tom calmly sipped his drink and tried to catch the eye of a pretty brunette in a blue top sitting on the opposite side of the room.

‘Tom!’ Jim echoed, following his gaze incredulously and seeing a table of four young, scantily clad girls.

‘What?’ Tom replied distantly.

‘Would you have used that?’

‘Used what?’

‘What do you mean, “What”?’ Jim exploded in exasperation. ‘The knife!’

‘The knife?’ Tom glanced at it as though he had forgotten it was there. ‘No, of course not.’

Speechless at his detachment and lack of concern, the bewildered pair watched their friend as if he’d mutated into a giant preying mantis, conspicuously and unashamedly ogling the restaurant’s females.

‘Well done,’ said Pete finally.

‘Thanks, mate,’ Tom replied indifferently. ‘Listen, I’m going to talk to those girls. If you had to choose, which one would you go for?’

Pete was still half-wondering if the whole incident had been a figment of his imagination but, as his anxiety eased, lightened up a bit and decided to humour his enigmatic, inscrutable friend.

‘The blonde one.’

‘OK. Jim?’

Stop Talking

With the suspiciously thin explanation offered, Jim was less willing to drop the issue at hand.

‘I don’t know,’ he said without looking. ‘So you just threatened him with a cutlery knife and he got scared and walked away?’

‘Yes! Now stop thinking about it and answer the question!’

‘Just seems improbable, that’s all.’

‘It was, mate. I was surprised myself.’ Tom smiled mischievously. ‘Now forget about it and pick one, or I’ll pick for you and give you the one with the double chin.’

‘All right,’ said Jim, deciding to count his blessings and drop it. ‘The one with the blue top.’

‘Sorry, I’ve already bagsied her. You’ve got the one with the massive tits.’

Tom stood up and made his way purposefully between the tables. The pretty brunette in the blue top spotted his advance and pretended to be deeply engrossed in the wine list. The others giggled and nudged her, and she swore at them beneath her breath in embarrassment.

‘Evening, ladies!’ said Tom, full of vim. ‘You’re all looking very nice tonight. Are you going somewhere special?’

All apart from the one with the blue top giggled again.

‘Unless you can call Claire’s special,’ the one with the massive tits answered, ‘no.’

‘Claire’s on a Friday night *is* special,’ said Tom, pulling up a chair next to the one with the blue top, who seemed determined not to acknowledge his presence. ‘Especially since *we’re* going to be there.’

Tom gestured to his table where Pete and Jim were unsuccessfully attempting to watch his progress subtly. The blonde girl, who looked

decidedly less attractive close up, made some noises of approval. Tom looked at her with a feral grin.

‘Which would you go for, Ellie?’

‘How do you know my name?’ she asked, as if it were a miracle.

‘Well it’s either magic or I can read that “I’m 25 today” badge that has your name on it,’ Tom replied smugly.

The reply went down well, despite the fact that it was more than a little bit sarcastic, and to his satisfaction, Tom noticed that he even managed to get a smile out of the pretty brunette. Only the one with the double chin remained unimpressed. The blonde looked again at the other table and cupped her hand over her mouth as she whispered in the ear of the one with the massive tits.

‘She says I can have the short one if she has the tall one!’ cackled the one with the massive tits, undoing her friend’s attempt at secrecy.

‘That’s lucky – they said the same about you, only you were described as the one with the massive tits and the blonde.’

‘Which is which?’ said the one with the massive tits, laughing and squeezing her D-cup with her hands to form a chasm.

‘That one’s the blonde,’ Tom replied, pointing at her left breast, ‘and that’s the one with the massive tits,’ he finished, pointing to the other.

Fortunately for Tom, he’d hit on a group, or at least a couple, who were not sensitive to forward remarks and crudity.

‘How did they describe her?’ asked the one with the massive tits, nodding at the one with the blue top.

‘Who – Sarah?’

Again, much approval.

Stop Talking

‘They described her as the one with the blue top. I described her as the pretty brunette, but they said, “Which one?”’

The blonde and the one with the massive tits cheered and clapped. ‘We’ve got a right charmer here, haven’t we?’ cried the blonde.

‘So you’re blonde outside and in, then?’ Tom observed, smiling at her patronisingly.

‘How did you know her name?’ asked the massive tits.

‘This time it *is* magic.’

‘Oh, come on – tell us.’

‘Only if Sarah will agree that you all join us at our table.’

‘OK, go on Sarah,’ urged the blonde.

Sarah looked at the one with the double chin, who was staring furiously at her menu. She leaned over and whispered something, but the double chins wobbled like jelly as the corpulent young woman shook her head. In addition to the chin, the unfortunate girl had mounds of thick, permed hair that shone with hairspray and rustled as she moved. She was overweight, pale-skinned, and had noticeable dark hair on her forearms that she kept rubbing. If there was a positive side, she had a cute, if a smidgen squashed, face that had the potential to be endearing whenever she relaxed her waspish expression into a smile.

The double chin’s displeasure at the interruption was not difficult to comprehend. It was clear from the conversation that she had come last in the selection process and probably not for the first time in her life, particularly if she hung around with the present company. If she agreed to hook up with these guys, she could count the rest of the night out – unless she hung on to see if one of them crashed and burned and went for her as a last resort.

Sarah whispered something to her friend, and again, the chubby cheeks and layered chin vigorously quivered their refusal. All eyes rested on her eyes, which never left the menu.

‘She doesn’t want to,’ said Sarah, with obvious disappointment. ‘It’s her birthday as well, so...’ Sarah looked back at her friend as if giving her one final chance to change her mind.

‘What’s your friend’s name?’ asked Tom.

‘Can’t you read?!’ the tits exploded, cackling like a witch. She reached over and grabbed the double chin’s badge.

‘I couldn’t see the badge for the wig.’

‘My name’s Shelley,’ Shelley snapped angrily, her locks bouncing cheerfully in contrast to her countenance.

‘How old are you, Shelley?’

‘Twenty-five.’

‘Really? You don’t look a day over.’

‘Ha-ha, you’re so funny,’ said Shelley so peevishly it *was* funny, making the one with the massive tits laugh and her massive tits jiggle.

‘You don’t look a day over eighteen!’ she retorted.

Everybody laughed at this, including people at the adjacent table, and Tom joined in enthusiastically.

‘Good,’ he applauded. ‘Actually that was better than mine. You see? We’re already getting along like a house on fire. Why don’t you come over and eat with us – there’s plenty to go round?’

‘You saying I’m fat?’ Shelley snapped, clearly searching for opportunities to get offended.

Tom laughed appreciatively. ‘No, but don’t let that get your hopes up.’

Stop Talking

‘I don’t fancy you, you know.’

‘That’s not what I meant. Now listen,’ he said, leaning toward her like an affectionate grandfather about to impart some sage, caring advice, ‘I know what you’re thinking: there’s one more of us than them, so I’m going to have to double up again. No need! One of our mates is coming down – should be here any minute, actually – and he’s bloody perfect for you. Trust me.’

Tom wiggled his eyebrows as though what he’d said was loaded with deeper meaning. ‘Wouldn’t say no to a filing cabinet,’ he added, under his breath.

Somehow, despite the brazen rudeness of Tom’s pitch, the four of them eventually gave in and agreed to sit with the teachers, but as Tom had made up the imminent arrival of the fourth friend, he had to think of someone who might be out anyway and wouldn’t mind changing his plans. The guy he had in mind was actually one of the worst womanisers he’d ever met. He was in his mid-forties, slight in stature, lecherous from his errant, groping hands to the glint in his indiscriminate, roving eye, and he prided himself on his bottomless repertoire of rape jokes. He wasn’t bad-looking and had a full head of glossy, carefully sculpted blonde hair, but the reason he got through the numbers of women he did lay in his wallet. It obviously only procured him a particular ilk, but in Brentmouth there wasn’t exactly a shortage of such a breed, and as luck would have it, he had a fetish for well-endowed, big-boned girls – particularly those who outsized him in all dimensions. Shelley, like a world champion, fitted the bill from every angle. Unfortunately, although he did agree to come, the profligate, unprincipled rogue stumbled across a hen party and, after

buying everyone champagne, got lynched and forgot all about his promise to Tom.

As time wore on and there was still no sign of the ‘imminent’ fourth friend, Shelley became more and more pugnacious, especially toward Tom, whom she blamed for ruining her evening. It was all the more accentuated by the fact that Pete and Jim were already sitting slightly apart from the others in a cosy little foursome with the blonde and the tits. Poor, loyal Sarah, the only one who seemed to care about Shelley’s feelings at all, was trying to interact with Tom while showing empathy toward her friend and keeping the peace between the two – a challenging task in itself – all at the same time.

‘So where’s your mate now then, eh?’ Shelley asked, full of resentment.

‘He’s coming, don’t worry,’ Tom replied breezily. ‘You need to go easy on him when he does get here though.’

‘Why?’

‘Because his pony just died.’

‘His pony just died?!’ Shelley scowled at him as if this were somehow his fault as well.

‘Yes, damn it.’ Tom clenched his fist in anger at the cruel hand that fate had dealt the animal. ‘Tragic car accident. The car was going too fast round a corner and ploughed through a hedge into the field where the pony and her three-month-old foal were grazing. Hit them both.’

‘Oh my God, really?’ asked Sarah, who had a pony of her own.

‘Yeah. It was such a beautiful animal, and so good-natured,’ said Tom sadly. ‘The foal was as well. Took after its father.’

‘In what way?’

Stop Talking

‘It was really tall. About ten hands, actually. Would have been such a noble beast.’ Tom looked off into the distance as if imagining the creature.

‘Ten hands?!’ Sarah repeated incredulously.

‘Yeah.’ Tom cocked an eyebrow. ‘About seven to ten hands, approximately. Its father was a stallion, you see.’

Sarah laughed. ‘It would be. What kind of stallion?’

‘I don’t know,’ Tom floundered in exasperation, ‘probably a Shire horse or something. Anyway, the point is it’s very sad. He’s cut up about it and so am I.’

‘Aah, it’s so sweet that you care.’

Tom gazed sorrowfully at his lager. ‘Thanks.’

Shelley huffed in annoyance that her friend was so overtly enamoured by Tom’s compassion; her experiences with men had given her a cynical, somewhat bitter disposition. Sarah, on the other hand, was a few years younger and significantly less acquainted with the wiles of men on the prowl and, convinced that Tom was the sort of guy who would be receptive to tales of woe, proceeded to share one of her own.

‘I’m just coming out of a divorce,’ she stated.

‘No way!’ Tom looked astounded. ‘Really?!’

‘Yes – why?’

‘So am I!’

Shelley snorted loudly enough to elevate the tablecloth and smiled sardonically.

‘Shelley!’ Sarah admonished, flashing her friend a reproachful glance.

Sarah launched into an emotional account of the deterioration of her relationship with her husband, while Tom was a picture of sympathy and the voice of understanding. It was amazing how they shared so many similar devastating experiences, watching helplessly as their marriages were torn apart by their spouses' philandering. During a moving account of an evening when Tom had returned home to find his wife in bed with his best friend, he felt a hand on his arm where it rested comfortably until the story was over. Jim was looking over during this heart-rending episode and when it was finished, stood up and motioned for Tom to follow.

‘What’s going on, mate?’ Jim asked, as they reached the bar.

‘What do you mean?’

Tom rapped the Kingfisher tap to the rhythm of James Bond as the Pakistani bartender came over.

‘What sort of bullshit are you telling that girl?’

‘What?’ Tom asked innocently. ‘About getting divorced?’

Smiling tolerantly at the apparent extrovert’s obstreperous behaviour, the bartender held up a pint glass and got the thumbs up.

‘Yes – and some friend of yours who’s coming down any minute whose pony just died.’

‘You heard all that, did you?’

‘Couldn’t help it, mate! I was thinking that either we don’t know you at all or you are a highly imaginative but unscrupulous teller of apocryphal tales.’

‘How articulate. I’m neither. I’m just entertaining myself while I lay groundwork for later.’

‘You are unbelievable – you know that? You threaten to beat up one of the biggest blokes I’ve ever seen, and his gang of thugs, then in the

Stop Talking

next minute you start chatting up a load of women, invite them to our table, and proceed to make up the biggest load of bollocks I've ever heard about getting divorced and an imaginary friend's imaginary dead pony!

'I do have a friend – he just doesn't have a pony. So what? Girls love ponies and she told me she's going through a rough divorce.' Tom checked his watch, frustration evident. 'What better way to connect with someone than to relate to their experiences and their pain?'

'It's a great way, mate – if it's not made up!'

'Well, she knows no better. As far as she's concerned, I'm a soulful, sensitive, compassionate, bloody great guy. I'm not sure if she saw the incident with the football fans yet, but if she did, you can add "hard" to all those descriptors.'

'Careful – that might be too close to the truth!'

Tom laughed. 'It *is* the truth, and that fat bastard knew it.'

Jim rolled his eyes.

'Anyway,' Tom continued, 'do you know anyone who would come down here and shut that fat cow up for five minutes while I talk to Sarah about my work with Children In Need?'

'Childr... of course, sorry. Um... Sam?'

'Sam's a girl! I told her it was a blo... hang on, doesn't she bat for both sides?'

'Yes, but you said you already told her it was a bloke,' Jim reminded him.

'I know, I know, but let's face it – she probably takes what she can get. Sam'll be bloody perfect. Well done, mate!' Tom clapped him on the shoulder. 'Have you got her phone number?'

‘Tom,’ said Jim, with some urgency, ‘you’ve told her you’ve got some guy coming down, presumably because you wanted to even things up and get her, and her friends, to sit with us, so she’s expecting *a guy* to turn up. If Sam turns up instead, she’s going to go ape shit.’

‘Jim...’ Tom began.

‘And what about Sam, for Christ’s sake?!’ Jim added, trying to appeal to Tom’s better nature.

‘Jim,’ said Tom, clapping his friend on the shoulder again. ‘Your problem is you think too much about other people’s feelings. Just give me the fucking number and stop being so moralistic all the time.’

Jim laughed. ‘I can honestly say no one’s ever accused me of that before. OK, sod it. Here you are.’

When they returned to the table, Pete seemed to be having no problem entertaining both the one with the massive tits and the blonde, but Sarah and Shelley were in the throes of an argument. Without warning, Tom picked up the double chin’s chair with her on it, moved it over about two feet while she squawked indignantly and flapped her arms about like a chicken, then sat down between them. She goggled at him, mouth agape in disbelief at his audacity, then huffed and turned her back on the table. Winking conspiratorially at Sarah, Tom tapped Shelley on one of her podgy white shoulders until she swivelled round, the underside of her fleshy arms wobbling like blancmange, and glared at him furiously.

‘What?’ she snarled.

‘My friend’s going to be here in five minutes.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Shelley replied, turning away again. ‘You said that an hour ago.’

Stop Talking

‘That was another friend. He’s too upset about his horses to think about feeding any, so he’s staying in.’

‘Aah, that’s terrible,’ said Sarah, missing the joke. She actually looked genuinely upset, so Tom used the opportunity to put an arm around her shoulder.

‘I know,’ he continued, deciding to capitalise on her distress. ‘What made it worse was he had to shoot them.’

‘What?!’ Sarah’s jaw landed on the tablecloth. Even Shelley seemed startled by this development.

‘They didn’t die from being hit by the car,’ Tom lamented, ‘they just got their legs broken, so poor Tom had to shoot them – in the head – when he found them two days later.’

‘Oh, no!’ Sarah looked as if she were about to cry.

‘I know,’ Tom shook his head miserably. ‘Poor Tommy.’

‘Wait – isn’t your name Tom?’ Shelley asked with a mild sneer.

‘Yes. Makes it seem even closer to home.’ Tom breathed noisily as though to compose himself. ‘Anyway, he’s not coming out anymore so we’ve got someone else.’

‘I’m not desperate, you know.’

‘I doubt that but...’

‘Tom!’ Sarah smacked him on the arm, but Shelley saw the flirtatiousness in the blow and shook her head in disgust.

‘...but you don’t need to be,’ Tom finished. ‘You are about to meet Sam – easily the best-looking of my friends.’

For the first time that evening, Shelley looked interested in something Tom had to say. Then she remembered that she was talking to the sort of guy she had always hated and stuck her pouty face back on.

‘Yeah, right.’

‘I know, it’s hard to believe. Especially coming from a bloke like me,’ said Tom, slicking his eyebrows and puffing the back of his hair, ‘but seriously, it’s true. Drink some more of this.’

He poured her another glass of wine. ‘Your luck’s in.’

Shelley did her best to look bored to death but couldn’t fully disguise the fact that the prospect had piqued her curiosity. Meanwhile, Tom launched effusively into a heart-warming story of how, apart from his ongoing fund-raising work for Children In Need, he ran a hundred miles for a local children’s hospice. He kept refilling Sarah’s glass, in addition to Shelley’s, as his imagination got wilder and his stories more extraordinary with it. The bull shark story he’d last shared with his uncle was retold, only this time he managed to kill one and haul it back to shore on his back to feed the starving local inhabitants of a remote Fijian island. Sarah listened with admiration, not because she was unintelligent, but because she was a bit naïve and drunk, and really wanted to believe that Tom was all that he seemed. She couldn’t condone his cheekiness with Shelley, but it wasn’t as if she were holding back.

Tom spied Sam at the entrance to the restaurant and removed himself discretely so as not to draw attention. He subtly signalled for Jim to come with him, and the pair quickly made their way over before the bewildered girl had chance to ask the waiter where they were sitting. Jim took Sam gently by the elbow and led her to one side where they were neatly obscured by a pillar.

‘Hi Sam. How’s things?’ asked Tom.

‘What’s going on, Jim?’ Sam replied, ignoring both Tom and his question.

Stop Talking

‘I thought you wouldn’t mind if I gave your number to Tom,’ said Jim innocently, knowing full well she would and did. ‘He’s got a surprise for you.’

‘Have you indeed, Tom?’ Sam turned to this near-stranger who had rung her to say she’d better get down here for Jim’s sake and then hung up. ‘I barely know you. Why on earth would you be in the business of giving me surprises?’

‘Jim says you like feeding the horses.’

Jim cringed at the word ‘feeding’ and covered his face.

‘Feeding the what?’

‘Feeding the horses.’

Tom cupped his hand and held it next to her crotch. Sam slapped his hand away and gave him a look so venomous, most ordinary people would have stopped grinning.

‘He does, does he?’ she replied with a face like thunder. ‘Jim, you’re in deep shit.’

‘I know... sorry,’ Jim replied, visibly scared.

‘Actually, I knew it already,’ Tom continued unabashed, seemingly unaware of Jim’s discomfort and Sam’s indignation. ‘So does anyone who’s ever been in the Fox and Hound. Anyway, who cares? Your sort are the best, whichever way you look at it. You’re like the universal blood donor – you’re good for anyone, and anyone’s good for you.’

‘Jim, I can’t believe this wanker’s a friend of yours.’

‘Neither can I.’

Tom smirked as if being called a wanker was the best order of compliment one could receive.

‘OK, asshole, what’s the fucking surprise?’ Sam growled, deciding that as she was here, she might as well find out.

‘Well, remember what I said about the blood donor?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I’ve got one for you.’

‘You mean you’ve got me a lesbian date?’

Tom laughed. ‘I wouldn’t call it a date, but lesbian definitely.’

‘I don’t believe this. Jim...’ Sam shook her head incredulously. ‘Jim, you’re dead, you know that don’t you?’

‘Yep.’ Jim looked thoroughly miserable.

‘Well come on, let’s go and meet her, shall we?’ said Tom, gamely. ‘Just so you know, we think you’re miles better-looking than her.’

‘Whatever,’ Sam muttered. ‘Wanker.’

The three of them, with Tom leading and Jim sandwiched in between expecting a smack in the head at any minute, made their way to the table. By this time, the others had noticed the two teachers’ prolonged absence and were asking Pete what was going on. As he was making up an answer, a procession of people marched up and stopped in front of Shelley, who had worked herself up into quite a state now that it seemed the blind date was about to happen. She looked up at the convoy as if she were on the verge of wetting herself.

‘Hi,’ said Tom, smiling broadly at the expectant ensemble. No one responded.

Tom stood to one side so everyone could see the tall, buxom, broad-shouldered, but swarthy and engagingly good-looking woman, who was cringing slightly and looking uncharacteristically nervous and unsure of herself.

Stop Talking

‘This is Sam.’

Everybody gasped and looked at Shelley, waiting for her to blow a fuse, but at that moment there was a disturbance behind them.

‘A hundred and eighty quid’s worth of champers and still the ungrateful sluts fucked off,’ proclaimed a suave, fair-haired gentleman in an Armani suit and a windfall of bling as he strode over and pretended to punch Tom in the face. ‘So, Mr. Thomas Langston, which one of these fine wenches is about to get lucky tonight? Judging by the way she’s sitting on his lap, Goldilocks is taken, and the nice rack in the corner looks ready to flop out into your mate’s vindaloo.’ The smutty new arrival nodded at the blonde and the massive tits, grinning lasciviously. ‘The little one in the blue top looks like she’s still breast-feeding and oh, Jesus, Mary, sweet mother of God – what in the name of Satan is that?’ The grin vanished and the debauched forty-year-old gaped at the double chin as if her nose was upside down. ‘I know I like ‘em big, Tom, but she’s got a face like a bloody Shih Tzu. It would take at least another hundred and eighty quid’s worth of bubbly to make a fox out of that. And I’d be too wasted to get it up anyway. Bollocks to this.’ He looked positively angry with Shelley for her shortcomings. ‘You owe me, Tommy, my boy. If you bother to make it to Claire’s, you go straight to the bar and buy me the most expensive cocktail on the menu. Later...’

With that, the obscene fellow departed, swearing at a child as he almost fell over her in his haste. In the vacuum he had left, most people were too stunned to say anything. Ironically, or because she had simply lost her grip on reality, Shelley seemed unaffected by the vicious invective and nonchalantly lit a cigarette. Next to her, Tom appeared transfixed by a piece of naan bread. He was picking crumbs off it, seemingly oblivious to

what had gone on around him, while Sarah was looking at him curiously. She tried touching his arm but without response, and eventually he pulled away, rose abruptly, and walked out of the restaurant, knocking into a waiter on the way and sending a dirty plate crashing to the floor. Shards of ceramic slithered under the neighbouring tables and the waiter made an exclamation in Punjabi, but Tom acted as though he were completely unaware of what had happened and didn't even look back. Seeing that something was alarmingly wrong, Jim and Pete followed him outside.

They emerged on the pavement to find him leaning against a wall, resting his head on his arm like a drunk.

'Tom?' Pete queried. 'What's going on?'

'Are you OK?' asked Jim. 'Did that charming ladies man deviate from the script you gave him?'

Tom didn't move or reply.

'Tom! What the hell's going on, mate?' Jim rested a hand on his shoulder and shook him gently. Tom turned slowly to face them. He looked about to break down.

'Holy shit!' Pete exclaimed. He had never seen anyone look so scared. 'What is it? What's wrong?'

'You can tell us, mate,' Jim reassured. 'Whatever it is.'

Tom drew several deep breaths and leant his head back against the wall.

'I don't know what just happened.' His voice was shallow and quivering.

'What do you mean?' asked Pete. 'When?'

Stop Talking

‘Just now, there were those football fans taunting us. There was a massive bloke and...’ Tom trailed off as he tried to recall what happened afterwards.

‘Yes?’ asked Pete dubiously, having no idea where this was heading. ‘It was about an hour ago actually, but go on.’

‘That’s it.’ Tom shrugged and rubbed his forehead. ‘I can’t remember anything else.’

‘You can’t remember anything else?’ Pete frowned and half-smiled, suddenly thinking Tom was winding them up.

Jim chuckled. ‘You can’t remember talking to that huge guy and threatening him with a knife?’ he asked, as if he also had his suspicions.

‘Jesus! No!’ Tom looked horrified.

‘What about chatting up those girls?’ asked Pete.

‘What girls?’

‘What gir..?!’ Pete stopped, realising there was a serious problem. ‘OK, come here. Look inside. You see the elevated area with the pink wall and the plant?’

‘Yes.’

‘The girls who are sitting with Sam.’

‘I don’t recognise them.’ Tom hung his head wretchedly. He knew that admitting his memory loss would lead to all kinds of other questions about recent events.

‘Do you remember ringing Sam up and inviting her down here?’ Jim asked.

‘No.’

‘So you remember absolutely nothing since the altercation with the football fans?’

‘No.’

Pete opened his mouth to say something but couldn’t think of anything worthwhile.

‘Fucking hell!’ said Jim, also at a loss to express himself meaningfully. ‘Has this happened before?’

Tom hesitated ever so slightly. ‘No – never.’

The two of them went on to describe what had happened in as much detail as they could and tried to console Tom by telling him it was probably the booze and nothing to worry about. Jim asserted that memory lapses are very common and easily treatable, but unfortunately, neither was particularly convincing if for no other reason than they didn’t believe themselves. In addition, both looked exceedingly worried about Tom’s mental health, especially because this further fuelled their doubts about the truth of his involvement with the police.

Tom stated that he no desire to go back into the restaurant and attempt to pass his sudden exit off as sickness, or something, and asked his friends to make his apologies for him. One thing was for certain in Tom’s head, as he walked back to his flat on his own; whatever had taken place last Friday could have been anything.

Jim and Pete's Dilemma

A sunny, breezeless, but raw day greeted Jim as he stepped out of his front door the next morning that October. He lived in one of the nicer, more picturesque areas of Brentmouth, within a ten-minute walk from the small, single-trade shops near the village green and wild cliff trails. A little beyond the local amenities, a strip of hotels, restaurants and bars surveyed the Channel, and a beautiful stretch of grass bounded by well-groomed flower beds lay between like an intricately embroidered welcoming-carpet. A walk to the stone wall at the edge afforded a bird's eye view of a prodigious assortment of tangled bushes and trees, buzzing with wildlife, which hung like an enormous tapestry over the side of the precipitous sandstone cliff face.

To the east, the coast curved southwards where thin fingers of craggy rock jutted from the water and gave haven to hundreds of sea birds. Here the indomitable cliffs were sheer and truculent and supported only the most tenacious grasses and isolated clumps of heather. Beneath the rugged, terracotta rock face, a pebble beach lined with dried seaweed and washed-up brushwood gave way to a narrow stretch of ruddy sand before

plunging down into the opaque depths of the bay. The abrupt gradient of the seabed left only a small area for bathers to stand, and this was constantly pummelled by dumpy waves that exploded into effervescent foam before fizzling into the sand.

When the beach lost its appeal, you could wander along the shoreline through the rock pools in search of crabs and starfish and then up into the woods where the slope was gentler. A rickety iron bridge arched over a small waterfall that glistened over a slippery, mossy bank and led to a cove where divers and weekend fishermen parked their wooden dinghies and pursued their hobbies unobtrusively in the quietude and tranquillity.

About a third of the way up the side of the cliff from the cove there perched an old pub that had formerly belonged to a fishing family. It was precariously constructed on an outcrop of rock, and the road that snaked down to it was notoriously steep – even for pedestrians. A favourite pastime for patrons was watching old or heavily laden cars naively attempting to scale the worst section, which dipped sharply right outside the pub lounge. The spectacle was heralded by the squealing of tyres on tarmac, whereupon a row of knowing, grinning faces would appear at the windows. The almost exclusively male drivers of the vehicles (women were altogether more ready to admit that neither their driving skills, nor their cars, were up to the challenge) embarrassed by their audience and loath to admit being wrong in front of their female counterparts, nearly always waged a war with the hill that lasted far longer than the evaporation of the last rational shred of hope. The prospect of defeat over man and his beloved machine was just too much of an insult, too emasculating to be conscionable, but the more each desperate guy struggled, the more compounded his humiliation became. With every

Stop Talking

passing second, as wheels spun and smoked, engines screamed their indignation, and the purple hue on the cheeks of each infuriated driver deepened, more and more overjoyed faces appeared to watch. Sometimes the space in the lounge became so crowded that people spilled into the road above the car, as if taunting it to run them over.

Often, rather than reverse back down to the car park in shame, the driver, as a last resort, would try to shift the blame and attention to his passengers by telling them to get out. This was always the most entertaining if there was only one passenger, and she was his overweight wife. For this reason, together with the views of the cliff, the beach and the open sea, Anncombe was a part of Brentmouth best enjoyed from one of the alfresco benches on the patio of The Fisherman's Fry, and it was here that Jim, unbeknownst to Tom, had arranged to meet Pete that chilly autumnal morning.

After the brisk stroll across the green at the top of the cliffs and down the zigzagging road, sucking in the salty sea air and breaking into the occasional light jog, Jim's blood was pumping vigorously, and he felt wonderfully revived after the initial grogginess when he awoke. His heart, however, was downcast as he speculated the reality, outcome and consequences of this extraordinary episode in all their lives. There was no doubt in his mind now that Tom was ill – maybe not irretrievably or congenitally so – but to an extent that made him susceptible to a mental reaction over which he seemed to have no control. It appeared as though – possibly through the combined stress of speaking to the police and the provocation from the football hooligans – he had experienced a short passage of about an hour that was completely erased from his memory the minute it was over. During this time, his personality had morphed into a

caricature of the elements that, through social conditioning, were normally suppressed. The insults and connotations of some of the things he'd said were outrageous, and his recklessness and boldness in standing up to the barbaric-looking meathead was like nothing he'd ever seen. There were a number of questions he wanted to address with Pete that morning, but they pretty much boiled down to one: did Tom kill Shaun Bratcher?

Pete's thoughts were channelled in much the same direction, as he sat in a taxi from the other side of town. If Tom's memory lapse was a symptom of some sort of breakdown that had arisen from the stress of working at Brentmouth, it was a crying shame for Tom and his career, and a loss to the teaching profession. But if Tom's condition had led him to take the life of a young boy, it was a tragedy of the worst kind. Both the murderer and the deceased were victims. From the continued lack of intervention by the local education authority in recent years, it was as if its credo was that, for the greater good of education in all the other schools in Brentmouth, losses such as these were an unfortunate but necessary sacrifice. The death of Shaun Bratcher was a horrifying consequence of twenty-first century competitive interschool education and, though rare in kind, Pete reflected, was one of hundreds of life-shattering cases in failing schools throughout the country.

The taxi pulled up about fifty yards above the pub, and the driver apologised for stopping short, blaming the car's bald tyres. Pete laughed as he stepped out and peered down the hill. The declivitous road suddenly dropped off like a ski slope as it doglegged past the pub and headed down to the car park. He handed the driver a fiver and jogged down to the patio where he saw Jim sipping a cup of coffee.

'Morning,' Jim greeted, handing him an espresso.

Stop Talking

‘Ta! Yep – it is,’ Pete agreed, squinting into the sun and pulling out his shades. He winced as the boiling liquid scolded his lips.

They both felt uncomfortable and a touch guilty about having a clandestine chat to discuss their friend, although Jim had not been specific about why they were having it – just that Tom wasn’t invited. They had never gone for a drink alone together before and the burden of conversation weighed heavily on their shoulders. Furthermore, neither wanted to be the first to say he thought Tom might be guilty of murder, even though it seemed highly likely that the possibility had occurred to both of them.

‘So what do you make of it all?’ asked Jim finally.

‘What – last night?’

‘Well, yes – and all the other things that have happened with... you know...’ Jim looked at his feet.

‘Tom?’ Pete suggested, as if he could have been talking about anybody.

‘Yep.’

‘I don’t know. I just think it’s a bit sad.’

‘Me too,’ Jim agreed, sipping his coffee though it was also too hot. The awkwardness they felt was teeth-grating and each focussed their attention on performing a pointless and repetitive task. Pete took to cleaning a groove in the table where grains of sugar had collected, while Jim tried to spread out the chocolate powder that had been sprinkled unevenly over the froth of his cappuccino with a toothpick.

‘What do you make of the discovery of the second note?’ asked Jim, stretching airily as if asking after the health of his mother.

Jim and Pete's Dilemma

'It could have been the same person it was before,' Pete replied. He tried to make himself yawn but it looked more like he was trying to swallow an invisible sea urchin. 'Or if he or she was in cahoots with Roy at the time, it could have been Roy.'

'Mmm, no.' Jim went out on a limb. 'I mean the fact that he found it in his trousers.'

'Oh, I see.'

Pete was thankful that Jim had broken the ice but considered his reply carefully before answering. 'It seems strange that he didn't notice someone putting it there. It's not like he would have taken his trousers off in school. At least, outside the gym.'

'Hopefully not, no!'

Both laughed indulgently at the implication of the comment despite knowing it wasn't particularly funny.

'Mmm, yes,' Jim agreed, his contrived look of mystification exaggerated somewhat. 'It does seem strange...'

'You think he put it there when he was in one of his... you know...' Pete was reluctant to coin the term.

'Memory lapses?' suggested Jim helpfully, glad that Pete was prepared to move things forward as well.

'Whatever they're called,' said Pete, dismissively. 'Yes – it certainly seems possible.'

He paused and frowned as if something had occurred to him that couldn't possibly be true. 'Although that *would* mean he was lying to us when he said he hadn't had one before.'

'I know.' Jim scratched his head, also giving a show of trying to find the error in the logic but feeling emboldened by Pete's use of the

Stop Talking

word, 'us'. It drew them together, as they addressed the delicate question of their friend's honesty, and made his doubts the doubts of both of them.

'The problem is,' Jim continued slowly, 'that if he is lying about that, he could be lying about other stuff.'

'Like what?' Pete asked innocently.

'Anything.' Jim shrugged his shoulders.

'You mean, like what happened on Friday night last week?'

'Possibly.'

Pete blew his cheeks out and ran his fingers through his short hair. 'It might be that he just doesn't remember,' he said doubtfully.

'Yeah, but he would remember that he didn't remember though, wouldn't he?' Jim spread his hands to express the inherent sense in that. 'He would remember now that he can't remember what happened for a portion of last night.'

Pete nodded. 'So what you're saying is he might have had a memory lapse last Friday, knows it, but isn't telling anyone?'

'It's possible. I think...' Jim trailed off.

'Go on – say it,' said Pete, encouraging him to be blunt.

'Well, I think he might be lying about what he can remember as well,' Jim finished, pinning his colours to the mast.

'OK, I agree,' said Pete, confirming his allegiance and dispelling any remaining fears that they were talking at cross-purposes. He stopped playing with the spilt sugar granules and sat up. 'Now let's think about what he told us. As far as I recall, he said Shaun shouted at him, ran away, and that was the last he saw of him.'

'Right,' said Jim, much more relaxed now that he felt he could be frank. 'So the police believe that that *is* what happened, but think he

Jim and Pete's Dilemma

chased him afterwards – which is why he fell down a crevice several hundred metres away.'

'But he says he doesn't have any cuts like they found on Shaun's body,' Pete reminded him. 'Do you think he's lying about that as well?'

'No, I don't,' Jim replied with conviction. 'If he went down the police station and had photos taken, he would know it would come out later – there'd be no point.'

'So it's unlikely he was chasing him, at least not very far – definitely not a quarter of a mile.'

'Right, so let's assume he wasn't chasing him,' said Jim, moving an empty sugar sachet to one side. Pete could almost see the cogs turning as the art teacher worked through the possibilities like a mathematician in a casino. He definitely should have been a copper, Pete thought, smiling inwardly despite the depressing circumstances at the image of his perpetually unshaven, grim-faced friend with a policeman's helmet on his head.

'That either means he isn't lying,' Jim continued, 'and he saw Shaun, the poor little nutcase ran off of his own accord and, for some reason, kept going until he fell into the hole. Or he is lying, in which case... who knows?'

'You think he might have done something to Shaun?'

'Well,' said Jim, uncomfortable with the forwardness of Pete's suggestion, 'I'm absolutely certain that if he was normal for the whole of Friday night, he is telling the truth and he had nothing to do with it. I mean, Tom's a bit of a liability sometimes – as you know – but doing something like that... no way.'

'No, I agree. But if he switched, as it were...?'

Stop Talking

Pete was no more averse than Jim to fast track to the worst-case scenario, but so far, by nudging him in the right direction, it had been easier to let him get there on his own.

‘Come on, mate!’ said Jim, with a hint of exasperation. ‘Don’t let it just be me who’s hanging out on a limb.’

‘Sorry, it’s just difficult talking about a good friend of ours like this full stop, let alone the possibility of him harming a pupil. Sod it. If he switched, he might have lost it and killed Shaun.’

‘Right. Finally it’s been said,’ said Jim, breathing a sigh of relief. ‘We’ve seen what he’s like when he’s flipped out – it’s like an exaggerated form of when he’s drunk, only without the loss of coordination. *It is possible he killed him.*’

Jim turned sideways and stretched his legs out on the bench. Minutes passed and neither spoke. Pete rested his chin on his hand and gazed pensively at divers falling backwards over the side of a boat, trying to think how the hell everything had come to this – and so quickly. He tried to remind himself that they couldn’t be sure of what had happened yet, but it was no use. With crushing certainty, he knew that Tom was capable of this terrible crime, and yet he did not feel any sense of revulsion toward him. Why? he asked himself. Because it is not Tom who is responsible! his inner voice answered. His body had acted on the command of another entity, which took the wheel during his crazy phases. When he was himself, as it were, he was still the same guy who had become his friend.

‘What if he did do it?’ he asked eventually.

‘Good question.’ Jim answered, obviously contemplating the same thing.

Jim and Pete's Dilemma

'He wouldn't remember it.'

'I know.'

'He's not himself when he's in one of his episodes, and he doesn't remember his actions when he's out.'

'Right,' said Jim, knowing what was coming.

'So to what extent is he culpable if he did do it?'

'I'm inclined to say, not very.'

'It *is* murder though,' Pete emphasised, trying to be sure that their feet were firmly on the ground. 'We *are* talking about the murder of a child.'

'I know, but it doesn't matter how serious the crime is if he's not culpable, does it?' Jim pointed out, sitting up and fixing Pete with his arresting gaze.

'Exactly. I just wanted to be sure you agreed. So let's assume the worst – that he's guilty, at least in the eyes of the law – as far as *we're* concerned, he's innocent.'

'Yep.'

'Which means that if either of us is questioned at any stage,' Pete raised his eyebrows conspiratorially, 'we don't know anything about any episodes, or switching, or whatever.'

'Definitely,' Jim nodded. 'We keep the facts diluted and to a minimum. In regard to last night, he talked to some football hooligan, chatted up some girls, invited a friend to join us and went home. That's that.'

Jim was transparently relieved at the outcome of the conversation he had instigated and was happy they'd reached a consensus that not only supported Tom, but one with which they both felt comfortable.

Stop Talking

‘Good,’ said Pete, in conclusion. ‘We’re singing from the same song sheet, as Tom would say.’

Jim chuckled humourlessly. ‘Right.’

Pete brought up the subject of what might happen if he flipped out in lessons, and they both agreed it was too great a risk. They decided that, as Tom knew they were aware of his mental disorder, they should approach him about it on Monday to advise him to see a doctor immediately and get signed off for a few weeks. They had only one more week before the half-term break, but they still thought it was better that he spend as little time in school and in contact with children as possible – the effect of merely being inside the grounds might be enough to prompt a switch, and the consequences could be disastrous.

Tom's Revelation

A bolt of lightning lit the raging night sky and illuminated the curtains inside Tom's bedroom with flickering flashes. Rain thundered down in a vertical stream and created a magical incandescent aura over the roofs of the houses in the glowing light of the street lamps. It was an apocalyptic scene over the seaside town of Brentmouth, with its looming cliff-top hills and jagged coastline, but Tom was receiving an onslaught of his own in the early hours of Monday morning. In the grips of his recurring dream, he was oblivious to the storm, but this time he was seeing everything with much more clarity and detail. A small boy sitting on the floor of a tiny alcove in complete darkness, he was shaking from cold blasts of air that came in from a hole in the ceiling. He had been there, locked up, for hours – as he had been many times as punishment for being naughty – and this ongoing, torturous consequence was one he expected, accepted, and deserved. A faint bang filtered through the wall against which he rested, followed by the familiar, dreaded sound of approaching footsteps on the stone floor outside and the grinding of a bolt. A square, metal door whined as it opened next to his head and a weak light crept into

the confined space. Tom could see a long black cane faintly against the brickwork as it nosed its way menacingly through the gap and thudded against the far wall. There was a tutting sound, and the stick withdrew and started prodding in a different direction. When the tip of the cane finally found him in its blind searching, he was curled in the foetal position in the corner. It pressed into the middle of his back, the pain dull and mild at first and then acute and fiery. At the point when the pain became intolerable and Tom normally awoke, the cane retreated to be replaced by the hand of a woman, which grabbed his shirt and hauled him roughly through the opening into a large cellar. This was his toilet area and the repugnant smell of urine and faeces filled his nostrils and made him gag. For an instant, as they shuffled hand-in-hand across the slimy floor toward the foot of a ladder, Tom looked up and beheld the face of his torturer, before his eyes opened in the real world to the sound of an almighty thunder clap. The cellar walls faded away as they always did, but the image of the woman's face was etched into his mind as clearly as if he were holding her photo. He had seen her face tilted upwards in his dream, but now, as he lay shivering on his bed, it rotated slowly toward him and the iniquitous, satanic eyes turned his heart to ice. It was as though he had beheld the devil incarnate, and she had burned her image in his head as an interminable curse.

Tom broke into a cold sweat and gripped the bed sheets, trying to keep himself together. He knew that the sudden lucidity of his dream was significant and could have important implications about his recent mental problems. He had never thought much about the meaning of this dream until now and had always privately scorned those who believed dreams provided psychological insights, but seeing that woman's face had

unlocked a memory bank containing hundreds of images and sound clips from his early childhood. After his family moved to the south coast, he had never been able to remember anything from his time in Birmingham, but now he could picture the house in which they had lived with the long thin garden and the climbing frame, recall the tinkling sound of an arching sprinkler over the golden withered lawn in summer, and even smell the sawdust as his father cut up logs in autumn. He could see the vast grey road beyond the crescent gravel drive at the front of the house, the looming grey lamppost standing guard, and the row of shops at the top of the hill.

For a few blissful minutes, Tom allowed himself to reminisce as a plethora of other happy, nostalgic memories came to the forefront of his mind and gave him a wonderful feeling of relief and wholeness. Then, like an insidious, invasive disease, an image of a low-roofed, red brick building drove the pleasant images away and caused him to suck in his breath with sudden nervous anxiety. As he floated on his imaginary magic carpet in front of the fence and trees that obscured the place, he felt sure that inside lay the answer to something that was central and pivotal to his life, but, like an elusive word, the more he concentrated on it, the further it drifted away. Tom relaxed his grip on the sheet, closed his eyes and let his mind wander freely.

He remembered having a tantrum in front of his mother one day on arrival at this place, but the teacher in his dream came out, and he instantly went quiet. She took him by the hand, as his mother let go, and the feeling of separation from all that was good in the world was so intense and agonising that it overshadowed even the prospect of the forthcoming period of isolation. That had become a mere numbing fact of existence. His persecutor led him up a ramp into the building, the interior of which

less familiar, and then behind the stage to a trapdoor concealed by boxes. They opened this up and climbed down a ladder to a cellar, where the woman crouched so that her face was level with his.

‘You know why you are here, don’t you Thomas?’ she said.

The chilling familiarity of her strange accent took him to the brink of identifying her and placing the surroundings, and Tom zoned in on it.

‘Yes, miss.’

‘Tell me why, Thomas.’

‘Because I am a naughty boy.’

It was disturbing to hear his own voice as a child, heart-warmingly innocent but so infused with misery.

‘That’s right, Thomas. I’m doing this for your own good,’ she said, opening the small door in the wall and helping him through. ‘One day you’ll remember all my hard work and thank me for it.’

With those last words every neurone in Tom’s brain overloaded as he finally put everything in context with a jolt so powerful that he choked and rolled off the bed. Tom lay on his back on the floor for a moment, hyperventilating, and then leapt to his feet and slapped himself around the face. He dressed, washed, and went through to the front room where he scribbled a note on a piece of paper. Reaching inside his wardrobe, Tom pulled out the two death threats from their hiding place, pulled on a jacket and went out to the communal terrace. He bent over against the force of the rain and placed the notes in a chink in the stone wall. The few windows that looked over the terrace were dark, but Tom took a long look around him before satisfying himself that he was alone. He started to walk back toward the building, but something made him change his mind, and he turned and dropped over the wall into a backstreet.

Seconds later, Tom's door burst open, ripping one of the hinges out of its bracket and leaving it hanging forlornly against the coat rack. Three armed policemen charged into the flat and levelled their semi-automatics at his empty bed. Moss strode in after them, switched on the lights and swore. Although Tom's absence from his flat at five o'clock in the morning that inclement Monday confirmed his suspicions that the DNA results were no coincidence, he was angry not to have picked him up straight away. They were dealing with a teacher for God's sake – this part was supposed to be easy! He and the forensics team ransacked the place but came up with nothing to suggest that Tom had planned to leave and no clues showing where he might have gone. Striding angrily into the bedroom, Moss yanked a towel off the radiator and wiped the rainwater off his face. He stopped abruptly and frowned as he felt dampness in the material. With alacrity, he moved through to the basin in the bathroom, ran the hot tap and dipped his finger in the flow. The water came out warm immediately, and Moss smiled and checked his watch: 5.12am.

Moss ordered everyone out and walked the short distance back to the police station. He tried Tom's number on the way but got put straight through to answering machine, where he left a polite message asking that Tom contact him as soon as possible. The inspector decided to check if Tom had phoned the school in case he'd left any indications about where he'd gone, and within five minutes, he had the numbers of the Head and the two friends he said he was meeting on Friday. Hilary agreed to meet him at the school gates with the caretaker at six o'clock, but neither Jim nor Pete were giving him any information and sounded shocked to discover that he was even connected to the investigation. Moss was suspicious of their somewhat theatrical alarm at his phone call, but he

Stop Talking

decided to play dumb and asked them both to phone him immediately if they heard anything.

As soon as he got off the phone to the police, Pete rang Jim and found that he had been contacted as well. Unsure whether their conversation could be overheard, he kept the same astounded, naïve tone he'd adopted when talking to the inspector, and judging by Jim's reciprocal response, it appeared that he was thinking to err on the side of caution as well.

It was still dark outside as Pete got out of bed and flung some cold water on his face, and the storm was still in its strongest throes. He shook his head as he regarded himself wistfully in the mirror. Every day seemed to bring another chapter in this saga and each descended further toward Tom's ruination. Almost without thinking, Pete picked up the phone again and dialled his friend's number.

'Hello, mate!' Tom bellowed on the other end, causing Pete to drop his mobile in surprise. He snatched the phone up off the floor and pressed it to his ear, but he could hear the rain pounding on some sort of surface in the background, and Tom's voice was barely audible.

'Tom?' Pete yelled. 'Where are you?'

There was a delay as Tom deciphered the words amidst the thundering cacophony.

'Where am I?' he repeated.

'Yes!' Pete shouted, cupping his mouth around the phone.

'I'd love to tell you, mate, but as I watched the police break into my flat earlier, I have a feeling this conversation might not be private.'

'Sorry yeah – that inspector fellow just phoned me, actually. And Jim.'

Tom's Revelation

‘Bad luck!’ said Tom good-humouredly, as if Pete had just dropped a pound coin down a drain. ‘Got you out of bed, did it?’

‘Um... yes.’ Pete paused as he considered how to handle the call. ‘How did you...’

‘What?’ Tom screeched.

‘Doesn’t matter. Are you OK?’ Pete winced at the ludicrousness of the question.

‘Bloody perfect, mate!’ He did actually sound in the highest of spirits.

‘Do you remember our conversation on Friday night?’ Pete asked tentatively.

‘Which one?’

‘The one we had outside the restaurant just before you went home.’

‘Yes, sorry about that.’ Tom did indeed sound quite remorseful. ‘Tom can be a pathetic wimp sometimes – I really do apologise.’

‘No need, mate, no need.’ Pete wasn’t sure whether he’d heard correctly but wondered if, just from Tom’s tone and actions that morning, he had switched at some point during the night. He decided to test the water.

‘So do you remember the rest of the night?’

‘Yep. I know Tom can be a bit forgetful at times – not sure why that is – but it’s probably that he’d rather not think about how much better it is being me!’

Pete heard him OK that time but the sound of the ensuing laughter was drowned by high-pitched squealing, which cut through the monotonous pattering of raindrops.

Stop Talking

‘Tom?’ he shouted into the receiver, fearing these words might be crucial. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘Oh, don’t worry about it Pete, I’m fine,’ Tom replied, suddenly distant. ‘I just prefer being someone else from time to time.’

‘What do you mean, “Someone else”?’ asked Pete, pressing the phone so hard against his ear that it hurt and plugging the other with his finger.

‘The me who says what he thinks, the me who stands up to people, the me who – let’s face it – don’t mean to blow my own didgeridoo or anything, but the me everyone dreams they could be. Wouldn’t you like to be the one on Friday night who told that fat git to fuck off?’

‘Um... yes – I suppose so.’ Pete was only in partial agreement with Tom, but the invitation to debate the point seemed inopportune. ‘But Tom, you’re running away from your responsibilities – you’ve got a job for Christ’s sake! In three hours you’ve got to teach a class,’ Pete pointed out, before realising that in the present context, he wasn’t going to win Tom over with such trivial points. He changed tactics.

‘Tom, you need to face up to whatever charges they’ve got against you. Running away only makes you look guilty, and they’re bound to catch you in the end.’

‘I’ve got business to take care of,’ Tom replied ominously, ‘then I’ll be more than happy to face the music.’

‘What business?’

‘For the same reason as my location, can’t tell you.’

The din in the background had dulled, and Pete realised he must have moved inside somewhere. He thought about how best to proceed with

the bizarre phone call in light of the fact that he knew he was talking to the other Tom, and decided to take a huge risk with his friendship.

‘Tom...’ Pete saw the words in front of his face but couldn’t say them.

‘Yes?’

‘Did you...’

‘Did I kill Shaun?’

‘No...’ Pete tried to think of a way of rephrasing the question to make it sound more delicate but realised quickly that there was no delicate way of asking someone if they were guilty of murder.

‘You mean, yes, don’t you?’ Tom asked.

Pete hesitated. ‘Yes.’

‘No, Pete!’ Tom sounded amused rather than upset or indignant. ‘If I was going to kill anyone, I’d kill Hilary Clarke, or the Chief Education Inspector for Devon, or Donald Trump or someone.’

‘Right. Sorry. It’s just that... doesn’t matter.’

Pete considered the situation helplessly. On the other end, he could hear distinctly the whoosh of air and galloping noise of a train at high speed. He sighed in resignation; whatever horrendous deed Tom had in store, there was nothing he could do to stop it.

‘So you’re not coming to work today?’

Tom laughed. ‘Pete!’ he yelled. ‘Of course not! The police would arrest me straight away! I’ve left a message on the school answering machine to say I can’t make it owing to sudden and unforeseen circumstances. I’m sure they’ll cope.’

‘This will probably be on the news later, you know,’ said Pete sombrely.

Stop Talking

‘I know!’ Tom was still laughing, though there was a ring of sadness to it. ‘I’ll be a star!’

There was silence on both ends as Pete wondered if this would be the last conversation they ever had.

‘Pete,’ said Tom, his voice suddenly hard and resolute. ‘There’s no way out for me. I know it. I have to do what I have to do and my life will effectively be over, but I want you to know it has been good knowing you and Jim. I hope neither of you get embroiled in all of this somehow.’

‘Tom, listen...’

But he was gone.

Tom came off the phone and admired the view of the rushing coastline through the streaming windows. For a stretch of about a mile, the railway had been built up immediately adjacent to the shore, and the train appeared to be riding the waves. Tunnels had been gouged through the cliffs and hillsides as the track made its passage northeast to the heart of the country. Suffusing the waves with a soft pink glow as they crashed against the sea wall and sprayed against the side of the train, the brow of the sun broke the horizon and found a crack in the wall of boiling, churning cumulus clouds to the east. The fragile vestal ray was soon extinguished, however, and daylight merely revealed how dark and bleak the day really was. The angry sea was as grey as the sky, and it was difficult, particularly through the serpentine rivulets on the glass, to see where one started and the other ended. In the condensation on the glass, Tom traced the face of his persecutor against the backdrop of metamorphosing clouds and drew daggers in her head where they were split ephemerally by blazing stabs of lightning.

Tom's Revelation

In the reflection of the window, under the bright yellow, intrinsically artificial and depressing lights of the carriage, Tom caught another passenger looking at him as though he thought he had just escaped from a lunatic asylum. It wasn't that Tom was dressed oddly. In fact, he looked quite ordinary in his black leather jacket, jeans and T-shirt. It was that he had an unmistakable madness in his eyes. Tom turned to face him, and the man averted his gaze immediately and pretended to be admiring the view over the newcomer's head. Instead of adhering to social protocol and leaving it at that, Tom kept on staring until the unfortunate bloke, thinking he was safe, glanced back over to make sure that the unnerving stranger's attention had lifted. To the guy's embarrassment and alarm, he found that the dark, aquiline eyes were still glittering fiercely in his direction, and his discomfort was compounded when Tom flashed a rakish smile and waved. Deciding he couldn't spend the rest of his journey exchanging glances with what had to be a grade A nutter, the businessman folded his paper, got up and moved to a different carriage.

A short while later, feeling the need for refreshment, Tom made his way through the aisles toward the buffet car. Just past the second intersection, he spotted the fellow's balding head buried in a newspaper and grinned. Ducking down, he sneaked up behind the expansive wings of the broadsheet, popped up over the top like a prairie dog from its burrow, and boomed throatily. The guy jumped and his gold-rimmed, half-moon reading glasses did a miraculous job of keeping a footing on their long, shiny perch, but to the bewilderment of the passenger opposite, who assumed they must know each other, the perch remained hidden in the paper.

Stop Talking

‘Old enemies,’ Tom explained, jerking his thumb at the wigwam of print, and he swaggered over to the bar. He leered bawdily at the young female attendant, who looked half asleep as she pushed herself off her stool beside the TV.

‘What can I get you?’ she asked, wiping her hands on her apron and attempting to look cheery.

‘Two coffees please – one for me,’ said Tom, leaning his elbow on the counter, ‘and one for you.’

The girl smiled a tired but affable smile. The conditions outside were so severe that everyone on board felt strangely united by the experience.

‘I get coffee for free,’ she replied, ‘but thanks anyway.’ She placed a cup under the coffee machine and pressed a button. ‘Where are you headed at this awful time in the morning?’

‘King’s Heath, Birmingham,’ Tom replied, half an eye on the TV.

‘Really?’ the girl asked, clearly bored to death. ‘What are you doing there?’

‘I’m going to see a man about a dog.’

Tom held out a fiver but the girl waved it away, looking at him sidelong. ‘Oh, come on,’ she cajoled, ‘you can tell me.’

‘OK. I’m going to kill an old lady.’

The girl laughed. ‘You see – that was easy, wasn’t it? How is the old lady-killing in that part of the world?’

‘Better than average, I hear – particularly after a stormy night. Tends to bring them out of the woodwork.’ Tom pushed himself off the counter and raised his cup. ‘Thanks for the coffee!’

‘Take care,’ she called after him. ‘Bag a bag for me!’

Tom turned and laughed in appreciation of the girl's wit and good mood at such an unsociable hour, and she smiled back. It was the sort of inane conversation she enjoyed when all the others as a buffet car attendant were as dull as a forty-watt bulb.

The girl hoped she would see the tall, quirky stranger again before the train reached Birmingham, but when she did it came as a bit of a shock. His face appeared on the grainy screen of the television she was watching as it was showing the regional news. A school in Brentmouth had provided the photograph, and although it was unclear in the picture, the broadcaster described the scar she had seen on his left cheek. The attendant almost picked up the phone then and there, but she hesitated. Although the photo was proclaimed recent, the man with whom she had just made an acquaintance had facial features that were noticeably more drawn and gaunt, and he had given the impression of being considerably older. In addition, the unbalanced look that was so immediately noticeable when she first clapped eyes on him was markedly absent. The attendant decided to make herself sure before calling the police, so she faced the screen away from the bar, turned up the volume, and listened intently to the rest of the announcement. The police said he was wanted in connection with the death, described as suspicious, of a pupil who used to attend the very school at which the teacher was employed. He had avoided arrest shortly before daybreak that morning and was on the run. Authorities appeared to have no idea where he was but said that he might be headed in the direction of Worcester, where most of his family resided.

The girl felt sick to think that she might have been joking about killing an old woman with a man who was perfectly serious, but she was ballsy and principled and not about to shirk her duty to society. She pulled

Stop Talking

down the shutters of the bar, picked up a cloth and a bin bag, and locked the door. Taking a deep breath, she commenced a litter run down the length of the train, hoping that the ticket inspector wouldn't catch her and ask what she was doing.

Two carriages down from the buffet car, she found him staring, glassy-eyed, at the passing countryside. It was fully light now, but very gloomy, and the rain was still coming down in a relentless flow on the soft, rolling hills so characteristic of middle England. A river had burst its banks and the flooding had spread across many fields, including ones containing livestock. Ankle-deep in mud and dung, sheep and cows huddled miserably under oak trees that grew intermittently along the willow hedgerows, while birds took shelter silently in the branches above.

'Excuse me, sir,' the girl began, interrupting his thoughts, 'may I take your rubbish?'

Tom looked at her vacantly, then at his cup, then back at her before smiling broadly.

'You may.'

He leaned back as she wiped the table but not enough for there to be a comfortable amount of space between them. The brave attendant was also acutely aware that he did not take his eyes off her as she worked.

'So what do you do when you're not killing old ladies, then?' she asked, trying to keep her voice steady as she swept debris into her bin bag with the cloth. A speck of rain sprung through a tiny crack in the open window and splashed onto her wrist. She glanced at it and realised that her hand was shaking badly. Pretending to check the floor for litter, she bent over and thrust it into the front pocket of her apron while hiding the other behind the bag.

Tom's Revelation

'I'm a teacher,' Tom answered, still smiling.

'No way, leery, lily...' the girl stuttered, '...really? Where?'

'Oh, just some shit hole in Brentmouth,' said Tom, appearing not to notice the girl's anxiety. 'Wouldn't call it teaching really – it's more like policing.'

Emboldened by the candour of the teacher's response, the girl found enough courage to ask another question.

'So shouldn't you be headed in the opposite direction?'

'Yes, but my mother's been taken ill. I'm going to visit her.'

'But this train doesn't stop...' the girl stiffened as she realised her mistake. Tom raised an eyebrow and then laughed and slapped the table in sudden understanding.

'Stop where?' he asked sarcastically. 'In Worcester, by any chance?'

Tom stood swiftly and the girl, too scared to run away, cowered against the seats. 'Been on the news, have I? They think I might be going to visit my folks to seek refuge in the most obvious place in the country?'

Tom looked to be weighing up his options as he stood over the girl threateningly.

'I have never thrown a girl off a train before,' he stated, as if that were some sort of achievement, 'and I would prefer not to start now. But if you lie in answer to the following question, I may just have to break the habit of a lifetime.'

The girl's eyes widened in terror, but she still couldn't muster the courage to make a dash for it and except for a middle-aged woman sitting several rows away, the carriage was empty. Tom regarded the lady balefully for a moment as she, unaware of the disturbance, jabbered

Stop Talking

loquaciously into her mobile, and then switched his gaze back to the attendant.

‘Have you phoned the police yet?’ he whispered into her ear, every syllable angular and clear.

‘No.’

Tom stared at her for several seconds and then at the train route on the wall. They were but one stop from Birmingham New Street station.

‘I’m going to stand at the bar with you until we get to New Street,’ he hissed. ‘If you try to make a call or send a message to anyone, I will not be responsible for my actions.’ Tom chuckled grimly. ‘I barely feel responsible for them at the moment, actually, so if I were you, I would try really hard to make me believe that there won’t be a reception party waiting for me at the end. Now come on – let’s go.’

Tom turned the girl around and pushed her lightly on the shoulder. She moved down the train slowly and cautiously, lest her captor think she was up to anything suspicious, and fixed her eyes on the doors at end of each carriage in the hope that the ticket inspector might come along. As they passed through the automatic sliding doors of the buffet car, the businessman was distracted by the pneumatic hiss and looked up involuntarily from his paper. He shifted his gaze instantly when he realised who it was but saw distinctly the attendant mouth the word ‘help’ as she passed. It was all he needed. The man already suspected Tom was deranged after the uncanny waving incident that caused him to change carriages, and his suspicions were only reinforced when he later booed at him like a mid-pubescent half-wit.

As soon as the train doors opened upon arrival at New Street, ten minutes later, Tom sprung out and bounded up the stairs toward the

Pallasades Shopping Centre. Up ahead, a station guard was checking tickets at some turnstiles, and there, two large, official-looking gentlemen stood nonchalantly on either side of him. Tom obscured himself behind a group of students until they were within hurling distance of the men and then made a break for it. There was a low gate to one side of the turnstile for vehicle access and heavy luggage, and he veered toward it with frightening momentum. One of the men shouted to stop as they saw him hurtling past and a shrill whistle was blown, but Tom, having no luggage to slow him down, was already over the gate and heading toward the exit. The operatives were immediately on their walkie-talkies giving information about his description, whereabouts and direction, and as Tom careered through the revolving doors, he glanced over his shoulder and saw two uniformed police officers in pursuit. Out on the wet street, Tom sprinted aimlessly through the throngs of pedestrians, knocking into umbrellas and stopping traffic. For about thirty seconds his pursuers tried to keep up but it was useless. They would have been no match for Tom even without the cumbersome uniforms and higher regard for their own safety.

A few blocks further on, Tom slowed to a jog and took a moment to look around. He had not been back to his birthplace since he left at the age of five and had no idea where it lay in the big city, or how to get there. He hailed the next available cab and asked the driver if he would take him to the centre of King's Heath. Tom's clothes were soaked, and the cabbie cast a critical eye over him before letting him in and turning up the heat. The high rise flats and office buildings, typical of the city centre, petered out as they headed for the suburbs, and Tom spent most of the journey

Stop Talking

looking out of the window and rudely ignoring the ritualistic, platitudinous remarks about the weather.

Tom stepped out of the taxi at a random set of traffic lights in King's Heath and set off in the rain down a road lined with mature silver birches. The architecture of the houses was characteristic of the interwar period and most were semi-detached, boasting well-tended front gardens filled with shrubs, pines and luxuriant green lawns. At the end of the road there was another set of lights, beyond which the silver birches turned into lampposts and the houses stood closer to the road. Instead of gardens, nice little driveways lined with pretty flowerbeds provided off-the-road parking. Something about this street lured the sodden adventurer onwards in his quest, and his pace quickened.

After several minutes of marching, boots squelching with every footfall like Wellingtons in a quagmire, Tom came to a dead stop. In front of him, a half-timbered house, characteristic of the Tudor period, stood out from the others, and he stared at it impassively for some time, seeming to show recognition, before carrying on at a much slower gait.

At the top of the road, Tom instinctively turned right past a row of shops and stopped once more. He appeared to be studying a manhole cover in the pavement when, without warning, he straightened and stepped into the road. A cyclist, helmet angled against the rain, had no chance to swerve and smacked into him head-on, cartwheeling over the handlebars and landing heavily on the curb. Tom stumbled from the impact into the path of an oncoming car, whose brakes screeched and locked on the slippery surface as the rear skidded out of control. The bumper came to within a yard of a collision, and Tom looked up to see the flattened features of the driver comically squashed against the windscreen, where

they left a misty imprint. Swearing profusely, the stricken driver peeled his face off the glass and watched Tom continue across the busy road as if blinkered. Car horns tooted their disapproval at the disruption caused by his kamikaze jaywalking, but he reached the pavement on the other side otherwise unscathed. Behind him, the cyclist examined a nasty graze on his knee and cursed Tom's negligence, but decided against an altercation with the drenched madman and remounted.

Tom looked up the driveway of the long, single-storey building that loomed before him and hesitated. Raindrops drummed on the low roof and coursed along the gutters, gushing from a broken corner piece like a flume. Inside the building, the muffled sounds of toddlers playing were interspersed with the bark of an instruction from a female teacher. A raven landed on a fencing panel underneath a giant spruce next to the entrance, and it cawed loudly as if warning him not to enter. Tom regarded the hooded black bird expressionlessly until, disconcerted, it clapped its wings and floated high and away on a sudden gust. Prompted into action, Tom strode up the drive and along the ramp to the front doors, which he flung open tempestuously with a swirl of wind and noise and soggy dead leaves. He stood inside the entrance and glared round at his audience while the doors flapped shut behind, restoring the peace.

In a single room with a small stage and chairs stacked along the edges, a startled assembly of about forty children and a handful of adults descended into a soft hush as they stopped their activities in expectation. Water dripped off Tom's chin and clothes and gathered around his boots in a puddle as he ignored the stares and took in his surroundings. Then, without a word, he climbed the steps of the stage and disappeared behind the curtains. Seizing her chance, the teacher in charge motioned frantically

for the others to get the children out and ran to the office where she called the police. The sound of rummaging and clattering filled the small hall as Tom heaved stage props and boxes of costumes around backstage. He finally revealed the trapdoor from his dream but found it bolted shut and padlocked, and the iron was so caked in rust from years of disuse that it had fused everything together. Tom spied a metal pole for opening high rotating windows propped up against the breezeblock rear wall and began to swing. He hammered and railed against the lock, sending sparks flying, smashing boxes and slashing the cloth of the backdrop in the process, but, despite its age, the lock held firm. Tossing the battered instrument to one side, Tom jumped on the door with both feet and a booming hollow sound reverberated in the space beneath, confirming that it led to an underground space of some sort. He jumped on the door again, and this time the crunching sound of splitting timbers accompanied the echo. Encouraged, Tom stamped on the hatch with all his weight and strength until he put a boot right through the boards, gashing his right calf deeply on a rusty nail. Barely appearing to notice, he grabbed the metal bar again and, using a brick as a pivot, shoved it through the hole and levered against the lock until it twisted and bust under the strain.

Tom got down on his knees and peered into the semi-darkness as cold air, stinking of stagnant water and mildew, rose to greet him. He lowered a foot through and applied some pressure to a rung of a rickety old ladder that descended into the forbidding depths of the cellar. It seemed to hold firm until he took his weight off the other leg, whereupon there was momentary groaning before the rung gave way and sent him crashing to the wet stone floor beneath. As he fell, Tom disturbed thousands of mosquitoes nesting in a forest of cobwebs hanging from the beams. Like

the gentle humming of a ceiling fan, the tiny bloodsuckers filled the dank air like a clinging fog as Tom lay in a twisted heap on top of the rotten ladder. After a few seconds, Tom extricated himself from the wreckage, stood shakily, and brushed himself down. Despite the shaft of light from above that was illuminating the clouds of mosquitoes, it was too dim for Tom to see the blood that had now soaked through his jeans, and which he had subsequently wiped unwittingly all over his face. He reached out in front of him and instinctively shuffled through the gloom behind the broken ladder, collecting a blanket of dusty cobwebs like a silk glove as he went. His hand eventually came to rest on a crumbling brick wall, at which point, he stopped abruptly and felt about. Something seemed to distract him here, for he started clawing at the bricks in front of his face with his nails. Then, as though realising the futility of his actions, he squatted and reached out again until his scrabbling fingers found a small iron door. It was also locked, but when he yanked at the bolt the whole thing came away from the wall, and of its own accord, the door swung open. As the rusty hinges turned, whining in protest after years of inactivity, the potent mixture of coal and decay emanated from the minuscule alcove and filled his lungs. He groaned and fell backwards onto the dirty stone floor, vomiting bile in the darkness.

With tears streaming down his face, Tom rolled to his knees and tried to squeeze through the hole in the wall, but he was far too broad. His shoulders hit the sides as he stuck his head through, and again he reeled back, this time managing to catch hold of the door to steady himself. He extended an arm into the old coalbunker and felt around the far wall and ceiling until he found an outlet like a narrow chute leading upwards to the outside. The air coming from here was cool and fresh, and for a moment,

Stop Talking

Tom rested his head against the wall, reached up into the tunnel as he had done all those years ago in a vain bid for salvation, and wept silently.

Tom stayed in that position for several minutes and then snatched his hand back, stood up, and howled with such plaintive anguish it sounded inhuman. The unearthly noise carried outside the building, where frightened teachers were hastily herding the children off the premises, and some of the toddlers started crying. Down in the fetid gloom of the cellar, the howls turned to blood-curdling screams as Tom clawed the skin on his face and struck out at the walls in savage fury. He slammed fist after fist into the decaying bricks, snarling like an animal, until his knuckles were a mass of splintered bone and torn flesh. In the darkness, he drove his hand into a protruding nail, and finally, the pain overcame him. His head rolled back, his arms hung limply by his sides, and with shuddering breaths, Tom limped underneath the hatch. Standing on tiptoe, he managed to get a grip on a beam and, using the last of his waning strength, haul himself up to ground level. He waded through the junk behind the sagging backdrop and appeared on stage like a serial killer in a horror film. Interspersed with splashes of filthy, black water and smeared grime, he was spattered from head to toe in blood. It was gushing from a number of lacerations and gouges and seeped in oblique trails through his clothing as if he'd been hit from long range by a shotgun. Where he'd clawed at his face, blood trickled from parallel red gashes like war paint and congealed in an ugly magma beard under his chin. Draped across his head and shoulders, a thick tiara of cobwebs, dead spiders and mosquitoes gave him the appearance of having long, wispy, grey hair. The most striking part of the ghastly ensemble, however, was the river of red that dripped off the ends of his

fingers from the holes in his knuckles. It looked as though he had literally torn someone apart with his bare hands.

Tom lurched across the boards, looking likely to collapse at any moment, and dropped heavily to the floor with a resounding thud. He strode toward the small office off to the side of the hall to find the teacher still on the phone. The woman inside looked up at him through the sliding glass hatchway with wide, fearful eyes and cupped her hand over the mouthpiece. Tom stepped back and put his full weight behind his shoulder as he smashed into the door, breaking the flimsy Yale lock and sending a spray of splinters into the room. The terrified woman screamed and dropped the receiver in anticipation of the violence this maniac was about to inflict upon her, but Tom lost his balance with the force of the charge and fell to the floor, where he lay still. In the sudden deathly quiet of the building, as dust drifted through the bleak, slatted light coming through the office blinds, police sirens could be heard in the distance. Tom clambered slowly and ungracefully to his feet, staggered, and leant against the wall.

‘The first time I stepped into this building was nineteen years ago,’ he breathed heavily, his words almost incoherent. ‘I attended this school as a child and, until this morning, remembered nothing about it. Now that I do, I can see why. Every day I attended this hellhole I was locked in that coalbunker. Locked up in a coalbunker, in complete darkness, from the moment I arrived to the moment I left. Every day for two years!’

The woman was petrified by the gruesome appearance of this distraught, shattered man, but the awful truth of what had happened to him, in the knowledge that what he said was true, evoked a feeling of such profound sadness that it transcended her fear, and she replaced the handset. Shoulders sagging with emotional and physical fatigue, Tom looked

Stop Talking

wretchedly at the woman as though she could offer some sort of answer, but all she could do was shake her head in sorrow.

‘Give me the name of the woman who did this to me so I can end it,’ Tom cried, his voice breaking. ‘That’s all I want. Just tell me her name.’

The woman swallowed. ‘Her name was Helen Cartwright. There were allegations of child abuse about fifteen years ago and she committed suicide.’

Before Tom was even aware of there being other people in the building, he was tackled fiercely from the side by two policemen and sent crashing to the ground. His head struck the side of a desk on the way down and everything went black.

A Rude Awakening

With the possible exception of Hilary Clarke, the last person Tom would have wished to see when he opened his eyes was Inspector Moss. Yet that was whose craggy, furrowed face hovered above him as he rested in his hospital bed. If he'd have known about his visitor, Tom might have feigned unconsciousness in the hope that he would give up and leave.

In the corner of the room, next to the door, an armed, uniformed police officer stood with his chest puffed out and a look of extreme self-importance, while on the opposite side of the bed to the inspector, Constable Haseldon sat reading a copy of *Woman's Weekly*.

At first, Tom had absolutely no idea what was going on. With reassuring conviction, he presumed he was dreaming. What other explanation could there be for him waking up in the company of the inspector in a strange place on a Monday morning? He should have been looking at his bedroom ceiling with a pop classic tinkling away in the background. He'd had plenty of dreams in the past where he'd turned up at

Stop Talking

school an hour late or without his trousers – what was so surprising about being in a hospital with Moss?

A wash of patchy memories flooded his consciousness as he lay there disoriented and in pain. He could recall waking up in the middle of the night from a dream in which he saw the woman of his nightmares, and her face was still imprinted clearly in his mind. After that, everything was a blank apart from a hazy recollection of being in a cellar, bloodied and tired, climbing out and talking to someone. She's dead! The woman in his dreams was dead! The denouement came rushing back to him like a shot of morphine, ridding him of his initial anxiety and easing the discomfort of his wounds.

'Am I in hell?' asked Tom, with some sincerity. The inspector laughed and shook his head.

'No. You've gone to purgatory.'

'Really? Does that mean I need to expiate my sins by um... what's it called...' Tom's head pulsed from the blow he'd received and his vocabulary was hard to locate.

'Offering a confession? Yes it does.'

Tom chuckled. 'Tireless, aren't you?'

'Yes.'

'Corporal mortification, flagellation, or whatever it's called.'

'To be honest,' said Moss, sweeping a hand over his body, 'it looks like you've done that already!'

Tom looked down at his hands and saw that they were heavily bandaged. He could feel dressings around his legs under the sheets, and his face was tight with plasters.

'Yes it does, doesn't it?' he agreed, after a quick self-examination.

A Rude Awakening

The inspector wandered over to the window and peered out through the blinds at a panoramic view of a soaking Birmingham, sprawling miserably under a cracked marble sky.

‘Why did you kill Shaun Bratcher, Tom?’ he asked in a kindly, almost fatherly voice.

Tom laughed. ‘Don’t beat about the bush, do you? Before I answer that though,’ he began, as a lure, ‘you need to tell me where in the name of Haseldon’s helmet I am.’

Unsure exactly how offended he should be, Haseldon regarded the ragged, smirking patient superciliously over the top of his magazine, clearly forgetting they could see the cover. He turned his attention back to the article on dressage, sniffed dismissively, and declined to reply.

‘You’re in Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham.’

‘Of course I am. Where else would I be on a Monday morning?’ Tom grunted. ‘Do you happen to know if there’s anything I should be worried about – physically speaking?’

‘Apparently, you’re fine,’ Moss replied briskly. ‘Now, back to the reason you killed Shaun...’

‘Because he missed a detention!’ Tom replied jovially, before realising that light-hearted humour in the context of a child’s death was inappropriate. ‘Look. I’ll be honest with you,’ he continued, a bit more sober, ‘I don’t know how I got here. I have no idea where I got all these injuries, and I can see why, under the circumstances, you think I might have killed the poor little sod, but the fact is, I didn’t.’

‘What do you mean, you have no idea?’ Moss snorted. ‘You’re trying to tell me you don’t remember getting a train from Brentmouth to

Stop Talking

Birmingham this morning, being chased by the police, and beating the crap out of yourself in a nursery school?’

‘No.’

‘Oh, this is bullshit!’ Moss exclaimed, smacking the blinds in exasperation. ‘You know we have DNA evidence that you had physical contact with the boy on the day of his death?’

‘How would I know that?’

‘Rhetorical question.’

‘Was he wearing school uniform?’

‘No, he was wearing a white polo shirt.’

‘Yeah – that’s school uniform for Shaun. He was probably wearing that in his last lesson on Friday with me. I took a drum off him and patted him on the back. You can ask the Head – she was there.’

The inspector tutted irritably. ‘OK – then why, if you’re innocent, were you running away?’

‘I told you – I don’t know. Last thing I knew I was in bed at home.’ Tom propped himself up on his elbows and looked around at his surroundings. ‘In fact, I’m not altogether certain that I didn’t just go back to sleep and am still dreaming!’

‘Very funny, Tom,’ the inspector snapped. ‘I don’t know if you’re angling for an insanity defence with this nonsense, but it won’t stand up in court.’

Moss eyed him gravely, trying to impress the seriousness of the situation on him. ‘You do realise that if you are convicted of this heinous crime you will go to prison for an extremely long time?’

‘It had crossed my mind, yes,’ Tom replied lightly. ‘Anyway, I thought your theory was that I chased him through the woods.’

A Rude Awakening

‘Maybe – so what?’

‘So how do you account for the fact that I don’t have any scratches like they found on Shaun?’

The inspector paused to ponder the question but decided not to share his hypotheses with their prime suspect and ignored it. Thinking his boss was in trouble, Haseldon tossed his magazine aside and jumped to the rescue.

‘We know you are lying about your story,’ he interjected.

‘Oh? How’s that?’ Tom couldn’t help the disparaging tone he always adopted when addressing the constable. To him, Haseldon just seemed like the quintessential try-hard.

‘We have a witness who saw you chasing Shaun through the woods on Friday night,’ Haseldon stated, standing up and folding his arms authoritatively.

Tom’s façade of confidence wilted slightly upon hearing this. He knew he couldn’t remember what happened after the screaming faded in his ears and had accepted that this was a possibility. Haseldon saw the reaction and leapt at the opportunity to home in on this new avenue and score some points as a would-be inspector.

‘We have a witness who heard the screaming and had a perfect view from their upstairs window.’

‘From their upstairs window?’ Tom repeated doubtfully. The inspector, who had his back to Tom, cringed, and he coughed as a signal to his subordinate to be careful.

Haseldon instinctively looked at his boss for help but to no avail. ‘Yes?’

Stop Talking

‘So they were wandering around in the dark, then?’ asked Tom, sarcasm infusing his words as his scepticism grew.

‘What do you mean?’

‘If the lights are on inside and it is dark outside, Constable,’ said Tom, spitting the last word out in contempt, ‘all you would see is your own reflection in the window.’

‘The window was open,’ the constable replied smoothly.

‘Really? At ten o’clock in the evening in mid-October? Cold-blooded organism, your witness?’ Tom scoffed.

‘The witness opened the window when they heard the screaming.’

‘Oh, that’s your story now, is it? Why do I get the feeling this is all a nice bit of improv?’

Tom had heard that the police were allowed to make things up if it assists in an investigation, and it seemed odd that, if there was a witness, he or she hadn’t come forward earlier. None-the-less, he was unsettled. What if that buffoon, Haseldon, was telling the truth? Would this person be able to identify him in a line-up? If they could, it would mean that he almost certainly did kill that boy, or at least inadvertently caused his death. What sort of offence was chasing someone over a cliff? It would surely carry a custodial sentence. Tom realised he could be in trouble if this new bit of information were bona fide, but to his surprise, he still felt strong in the face of the attack.

‘OK, look,’ Tom began, his manner confident again. ‘You may have a witness who saw *someone* chasing Shaun through the woods, but it wasn’t me.’

‘The witness describes you perfectly, I’m afraid.’

‘That seems a bit unlikely, as it was pitch-black, but carry on.’

A Rude Awakening

Moss decided to take charge again. ‘Obviously they didn’t see how Shaun ended up down the crevice or you would either already be in jail or out of the picture,’ he interrupted. ‘But it certainly does mean you are lying, and if you would lie about that, we’re wondering what else you would lie about – or are you telling us you can’t remember running through the woods as well?’

The two policemen laughed indulgently at this, and Tom felt it best to let them. Thinking he was laying the groundwork for a case of mental infirmity, they seemed to have dismissed his statement that he couldn’t remember his actions that morning as a malingering tool, and consequently perceived it as a near admission of guilt. Tom saw no advantage in playing the exculpation card unless it was absolutely necessary, and in any case, the sudden introduction by Haseldon of the witness sounded spurious.

‘Inspector Moss,’ said Tom, affecting his own fatherly tone now as he addressed the detectives. ‘Sorry, and Constable Haseldon – how could I forget your ever-engaging presence – I’m telling you, you are barking up the wrong tree. I didn’t kill Shaun Bratcher. I did not kill him – it’s as simple as that. Surely you’ve got some leads on someone else you can follow up? Some other theories or explanations? Don’t tell me I’m your only suspect?’

The detectives tried to think of a good response to this question, but Tom continued before they had a chance.

‘I don’t believe it!’ he cried in theatrical astonishment. ‘I *am* your only suspect! I’m sorry – I thought you’d have a few. Shit! That is bad news.’ Forgetting his condition for a moment, Tom sat up in the hospital bed, a twinkle in his eye. ‘I tell you what – why don’t the three of us put

Stop Talking

our heads together right now and brainstorm some ideas? Sorry, thought-shower some ideas. Brainstorm is not PC anymore. It suggests mental dysfunction.'

'Mr. Langston, I really...'

'Mr. Langston now, is it?' Tom pretended to be crestfallen. 'I thought we had become best friends the way you were calling me by my forename earlier. Oh well, I'll get over it. Listen, I reckon you might want to stake out Hilary Clarke. She's a bit of a psycho, you know. She's had it in for me from day one. She probably set me up for this and then framed me. Or it could have been...'

Tom tapped his lips as if the truth were slowly dawning on him and then raised his forefinger in exclamation.

'The answer's been right under our noses all the time!' he declared excitedly.

Despite himself, the inspector studied the man they were a hair's breadth from arresting with a modicum of curiosity.

Tom looked at the constable and grinned boyishly. 'It's Constable Haseldon!'

'Oh, for crying out loud!' Moss turned away in disgust.

'In the drawing room – with the candlestick. He must have dragged the body to the crevice afterwards. And, dare I say it you lucky young man, you do look a bit like me – especially in the dark. Constable Haseldon, did you kill Shaun Bratcher?'

'Mr. Langston, stop wasting our damned time!' Haseldon barked, the intended assertiveness lost in the total absence of punch. 'We have a witness who saw you chasing Shaun Bratcher through the woods, and that *will* stand up in court. He already said he would testify.'

A Rude Awakening

‘It’s a he, is it?’

‘Figure of speech.’

The information he’d unintentionally disclosed, false or otherwise, was obviously supposed to be confidential, and the constable faltered and glanced apprehensively at Moss.

‘Don’t worry, Constable,’ said Tom conspiratorially. ‘I won’t tell that you told me. Although, if he did see me chasing Shaun through the woods, you might want to include him as a suspect if for no other reason than it gives you more than one flipping suspect!’

‘We’ve already eliminated this person from our enquiries, Mr. Langston,’ said Moss, taking back the reins swiftly.

‘You have, have you?’ Tom’s eyes narrowed. ‘So he was a suspect for a time?’

‘Yes, but no longer.’

‘So you brought him in for questioning?’

‘Yes.’

‘No, you didn’t.’ Tom regarded him with a mixture of triumph, scorn and resentment.

‘What?’ Moss knew he’d slipped up badly and desperately tried to work out where.

‘Before I had even stepped through the doors of the station, it was on the news that you lot were questioning someone.’

‘How do you know that wasn’t him?’ Moss challenged hopefully, but realising he was probably just getting himself into deeper water.

‘Good answer!’ Tom sneered. ‘Is the other guy twenty-two and local as well? Come on – admit it. You invented the witness to elicit a confession. Apart from that rather obvious flaw in your story, it *was* dark.

Stop Talking

How could anyone, without being within two feet of me, be able to give you an accurate enough description to separate me from just about any other bloke in England? Including poor old Haseldon. Oh my God. The wiles of police work in the twenty-first century. I assume lying is permitted in the course of an investigation?’

‘We are not lying, Mr. Langston,’ Moss replied in the deepest, most emphatic, voice he could manage. ‘It’s in your interest to believe that.’

‘Sorry, inspector, I don’t believe you. You clearly have nothing of any substance or you would arrest me. You are clutching at straws, and as a last resort, you thought – sorry, your sidekick thought – he’d spin me a ridiculous yarn about having a witness all of a sudden. It’s pathetic. Go back to Brentmouth, find the killer, and stop wasting *my* time.’ Tom snorted disdainfully. ‘And pissing me off,’ he added.

Inspector Moss looked as if he were about to retaliate with a succession of custodial threats, but then his expression softened and he wandered back over to the window.

‘So if you’re innocent,’ he said, with a detachment that belied his frustration, ‘presumably you wouldn’t mind taking a polygraph.’

‘They have no bearing in court, do they?’

‘What do you care if you’re innocent?’

‘I’m just wondering why you would want me to take one.’

The inspector paused. ‘Curiosity,’ he replied, with real sincerity.

‘OK,’ said Tom, looking at him intently. ‘If I pass the test, will you leave me alone?’

Moss returned his gaze. ‘If no further evidence turns up – yes.’

A Rude Awakening

Haseldon looked up dubiously at his boss, and Tom registered the surprise to mean that he could be lying about this too. On the other hand, as he couldn't remember what happened that night, there didn't seem to be much to lose.

‘When do you want to do it?’ he asked.

‘Today. We’ll give you a lift back to Brentmouth. Our car is unmarked, so you don’t have to worry about being spotted.’

Inspector Moss and Constable Haseldon chortled in a way that, for once, made Tom feel included. Ironically, the one time they did, he didn’t get it. To him, arriving unnoticed was a valid concern.

‘Good,’ he replied, looking puzzled.

Moss realised what his incomprehension suggested and, aware of implications for the polygraph test, shot his colleague a warning glance not to mention the news broadcast.

‘OK. I’ll go and find a nurse and get you released, and then we’ll get moving,’ said Moss, inspiring action by clapping his hands and heading for the door.

‘Are you arresting me?’ Tom called after him.

Moss paused in the corridor outside and stuck his head back through the doorway. ‘No.’

‘So I can go by train?’

‘We’d much rather you came with us, Mr. Langston,’ said Moss, giving him an ingratiating smile as if to say, ‘Don’t make us’.

Tom sighed. ‘All right. But just do me a favour and presume not to include me in the conversation on the way, will you?’

As they sped down the M5 in periodic bursts of light showers, Tom’s sullied mind was gradually and subconsciously being cleansed. The

two disparate entities that had successively taken over control were merging to form a whole – one free from disharmony, worry and insecurity. A feeling of warming confidence was burgeoning within him, and an incipient self was rising to the surface of his spiritual purging pool, soothing the pain of his memories. Tom was becoming the person he was supposed to have been before the abuse, the person he had strived unsuccessfully to be in the years after, and the person who might never have been had it not been for the death of a wayward child. He was confronted with a rather alarming reality, as he pieced together a picture of what may have occurred in his mental lapse since the small hours of the morning, but he felt an unaccustomed natural inner strength and was not daunted.

Tom assumed that the emergence of the woman's face, the subsequent realisation of her identity, and the profusion of early childhood memories had triggered another so-called "switch" to his crazy, libertine alter ego and, in an attempt to find her, led to his journey to the nursery school in Birmingham that he remembered attending as an infant and where the imprisonment had taken place. What had happened on the way to that school, he had no recollection, but it appeared that in doing so he had avoided arrest.

It was amazing to Tom to think that, for all these years during which his memories were repressed beyond reach, his true character had been warped and distorted, and the volatile person he had come to accept as himself was actually just a product of these formative years of maltreatment. He looked back at the past few weeks and replayed the scenes prior to the first switch, seeing the gradual deterioration and collapse of his previous weak personality. With a clarity that before had so

eluded him, even at times when he thought he'd finally worked it all out, Tom saw all his troubles at the school for what they really were: manifestations of a failing school, in a deprived area, under the leadership of a disastrous Head. It was not his fault that things had got so out of hand. True – others may have dealt with the stress better, but that did not mean he was to blame. He had the skills to handle difficult pupils and had proved so in his teaching practice. What had defeated him, through his emotional instability, aggression, and fragile sense of identity, was his inability to handle the incessant ongoing denigration from the top and the subsequent self-deprecation and self-doubt that sabotaged his every move, his every new stratagem, blighted every solace. It was this, along with his unspeakable history, that really inspired the switching, Tom concluded. The shock of the sudden unexpected noise in the darkness that fateful night had simply served to push him over the edge. Besides, he chuckled to himself, if what his friends had said about his behaviour on Friday night was anything to go by, this other fellow was far better disposed than he to deal with life's trials and torment. If it were possible, why wouldn't anyone in a sticky situation choose to metamorphose into a fearless, smooth-talking, unquenchable psycho?

Tom was progressing in leaps and bounds with his thinking, and although he did not understand *how* he was changing as he sat, deep in introspection in the back of the speeding car, he knew *why* he was and, with overwhelming certainty, that he now had the strength to take anything the school, or the police for that matter, had to throw at him. Despite the consequences that he knew he might still have to face, Tom felt empowered to put them into perspective, no matter how severe, and cope.

Stop Talking

The inspector informed Tom that they had searched his flat earlier, and that they were sorry and prepared to reimburse him for any damages. Other than that, he respected Tom's wish and the ride back was quiet. He was angry with himself for his part in the botch of the witness story. Haseldon's quick thinking and cool handling of the situation while under fire from Tom's interrogative questioning was impressive, but as a general rule, Moss considered it unwise to make things up unless the details had been carefully premeditated and discussed. Looking on the bright side, Tom's ignorance of the news broadcast meant that he would be more inclined to cooperate without the slowing and complicating presence of a lawyer, so it was very much in their interest to get him to the station without him finding out about it. He thought about confiscating Tom's phone in case one of his friends called but didn't want to arouse suspicion or instigate an altercation with a guy who, to them, was a borderline schizophrenic – not that he, nor Haseldon, had much idea what this was. Moments later, however, as they were passing Bristol, the damned thing went off and the inspector regretted his decision immediately. He pretended to be unconcerned and kept his eyes on the passing countryside, trying to concentrate on sifting through the fabric of the case while inserting all the new factors that the latest informal interview had yielded. The dangerous and very real possibility that their suspect might have an imminent and dramatic change of heart about his compliance, however, did not escape him. Taking care to be discrete, he nudged Haseldon, who, ever the obedient and complaisant underling, flicked a sly glance in his rear view mirror and slowed to the middle lane to try to overhear the conversation.

A Rude Awakening

Tom looked at the phone for several seconds, seeing that the number was that of Brentmouth School and unsure whether to answer. He picked up and immediately bit his lip when the voice on the other end was Hilary's. Initially, he was at a loss for words, but she inadvertently rescued him by asking what he meant by sudden and unforeseen circumstances in his answering machine message. Though he didn't know it, by giving the reply that his mother had been taken ill and that he had gone to see her – the answer he'd given the attendant on the train – he was subconsciously delving into the forbidden memories of his dying alter ego. Conscious of the need for an explanation for his injuries and an excuse not to come in for the next few days, he told her he had been involved in a car accident and admitted into A&E. He said that, owing to the gravity of his condition, he would probably not be returning to school until after half-term.

Hilary paused as she considered how to react to this story. Aside from the threads of information she had gleaned from the inspector, she had watched the news that morning and it seemed logical that even if Tom had not, he would by then at least have heard about it. Why he would subsequently bother to embellish the lie – especially to her – was a mystery. Hilary then remembered that it would sound suspect not to ask after his welfare following such an allegedly grievous accident and, switching ill-advisedly to her honey-textured nanny timbre, quickly rattled off a few sympathetic remarks. Choking back laughter at transparent insincerity, Tom informed her that he was on his way back to Brentmouth and would come in to see her the next day if she wished – as long as it was late enough for the pupils to have gone home. Moss' phone rang immediately after he hung up, and although the inspector did a pretty good job of responding monosyllabically, Tom was fairly certain who it was.

Stop Talking

Moss thanked the caller for the assistance but said that everything was sorted out, thank you. Everything except for a patchy theory, no conclusive evidence and a make-believe witness, Tom thought, smiling to himself.

The car pulled up outside Brentmouth police station and the three passengers walked briskly into the building. To avoid any semblance of arrest, Moss led Tom to his office and bid him wait there alone while he fetched the equipment. He shook his head in perplexity as he headed for the storeroom. Every time he thought he had things sewn up, Tom came up with something to put a spanner in the works. The bloke was clever, Moss admitted begrudgingly, but at the same time, he really seemed to believe his story. In all the years he had been in the force, Moss had never encountered someone that convincing who wasn't innocent, and yet there was just too much circumstantial evidence to the contrary. He couldn't ignore the fact that Tom had voluntarily come forward to assist in the investigation, but that may simply have been a devious tactic to throw them off the scent and a way of covering himself should anyone later say they had seen him in the vicinity that night. Furthermore, the guy was unpredictable, aggressive, and liable to erratic and senseless behaviour, such as taking off in the middle of the night to travel a hundred and fifty miles for a reason he claimed not to remember. Maybe he was a head case. Maybe he was so good at lying that he had managed to convince himself that what he said was true. It was certainly working on him, Moss thought, chuckling ruefully as he rummaged through the dusty piles of neglected machinery.

The inspector had only used a polygraph once before, and the results showed conclusively that the suspect was lying through his gold, studded teeth. He told himself that if the same were not true of Tom

Langston, he would have to let himself entertain the possibility that they were indeed barking up the wrong tree and begin to explore different lines of inquiry. Whatever the reality, this was no accident. Of that there was no doubt. That boy was running away from someone, or something, and running for his life. What remained of his face was not merely marked by a few scratches that he could have received from play fighting with friends, but gouged deeply, as though he had run through the woods without the slightest thought to protect his face. None of his friends could have instilled that sort of abject terror, and Moss didn't believe in ghosts. That left adult humans or dogs, and for a dog to chase a child over such a distance it would surely have to be rabid – an infection he knew had been eradicated from the United Kingdom. So, the inspector extrapolated, it was an adult, probably male, who had cause either to *chase* the boy to his death, or catch him and *drop* him to his death. If it was Tom Langston, the absence of scratches on his body precluded the first possibility because there was no way he could have run that far in the dark without himself sustaining a few lacerations. That ruled out manslaughter, as it didn't matter how Shaun ended up at the bottom of that crevice, he had to have been carried or dragged there, which demonstrated irrefutable intent to kill him. There were certainly enough cuts on his legs and torso to be consistent with this theory. If it *was* Tom, Moss concluded, it was murder – plain and simple. And so far, everyone else they had spoken to had no motive and at least one alibi.

He returned to his office to find Tom half-asleep in his chair. Whatever atrocity had occurred that day had taken its toll, physically and mentally, and this was good news for the polygraph, Moss reflected, as he would be less able to subvert the results. The situation was not ideal,

however, owing to the bandaging around Tom's hands, and Moss realised he would have to augment the results a small proportion to compensate. He carefully applied the sensors to the sensitive areas on his arms and chest and switched on the machine. The inspector finally sat down in front of the screen, calibrated the settings and explained the procedure, reassuring Tom that, if he were proved innocent, this would be their last contact.

‘Are you ready?’ he asked.

‘Yes, no,’ Tom replied flatly. ‘Now you tell me which.’

‘It seems that you're both,’ said Moss, smiling at the screen. ‘It obviously doesn't work very well. OK. This test would normally take about two hours, but as you are doing this voluntarily and I can see you are tired, we're going to make it a lot shorter.’

Moss began by asking him all the straightforward questions he had in previous interviews to check that the information given was consistent with before. As he expected, the answers were not only practically a carbon copy, but the machine showed no physiological fluctuations in heart rate, blood pressure, respiration, or electro-dermal activity. That is, until the subject of Shaun's roaring came up, at which point, all readings fluttered slightly. Moss felt a tiny prickle of excitement. He glued his eyes to the data and repeated the question.

‘Was there any communication between you and Shaun when you saw each other that night?’

‘As I just told you – yes, there was,’ Tom replied a little nervously. He could remember roaring back at Shaun and then screaming blue murder, as it were, and it only needed the right question from the inspector to extract this new, incriminating piece of information.

A Rude Awakening

‘Yes?’ Moss was trying to encourage him to expand without asking leading questions.

Tom cleared his throat. ‘He roared at me from behind the wall.’

Again, the screen showed marginal fluctuations.

‘Did he say anything to you – any actual words?’

‘No.’

‘Did you say anything to him?’

‘No.’

‘What happened after that?’

‘As far as I remember, I went home.’

No reaction.

‘As far as you remember?’

‘Yes.’

‘You definitely don’t remember anything, other than what you’ve told me, about what happened after that?’

‘No.’

‘So you’re sure you don’t remember throwing Shaun down a ravine or anything?’ said Moss sardonically, keeping his eyes on the screen.

‘Yes.’

To Moss’s disappointment, there was no significant change in any of his measurements during the last six questions. He tried a different tack.

‘Why did you come forward to tell me about seeing Shaun Bratcher that evening?’

‘Because I thought it may be helpful to the investigation.’

‘No other reason?’

‘No.’

Stop Talking

‘Is there any reason why you might have wanted Shaun Bratcher dead?’

‘No.’

‘Have you ever thought about killing a pupil?’

‘No.’

‘But you didn’t like him?’

‘No, I didn’t.’

Moss looked despondently at the polygraph.

‘Tom,’ he said, as if everything rode on the next answer. ‘Did you kill Shaun Bratcher?’

Tom hesitated fractionally as he considered his reply. The first answer that came into his head was, ‘I don’t know’, but he realised that if he gave it he might cause himself a lot of additional trouble. On the other hand, if he said no, the polygraph would presumably show that he was lying, which thus far, he had avoided doing completely. Then he thought back again to what his friends had told him about the night when he had apparently coolly threatened to stab someone in a restaurant, imposed himself on a table of random women, made up stories about dead ponies and getting divorced, and tricked someone he barely knew into a blind lesbian date. He decided that he could answer the question honestly after all.

‘No,’ he replied.

Moss waited for a moment as he stared glumly at the screen and then sighed and flicked the switch. It was time to let this man go.

Hilary gets her Comeuppance

The bell for the end of school rang and, like an ant hill that has been disturbed by a marauding beast, children poured from every outlet and streamed through the main gates. Tom watched the exodus from the safety of the woods on the other side of the grounds where he sat in a pile of dry, dead leaves that he had gathered from the thick bed covering the ground. With a serenity he had never experienced, particularly within the perimeter of Brentmouth School, Tom smiled indulgently at the new lease of life he had been afforded. He had slept from the moment his head hit the pillow the previous day to the moment his companionable seagull decided it was time for him to get up at 2.30 that afternoon. When he awoke, he felt more refreshed than he ever had – rested and free of the burden he'd unwittingly carried his whole life, and which had crippled him over the past two months.

Cigarette smoke wafted over from a small band of pupils who thought they were hidden in the maze of rhododendron limbs that dominated the thicket floor. Tom shivered as goose pimples stood up on his arms and legs, and he rose and wandered down the winding dirt path

Stop Talking

toward the group. The grubby, dishevelled young teenagers saw him coming and, being new to the game, hastily tried to conceal their cigarettes behind their backs. Tom laughed as he approached.

‘Not only can I smell the smoke, but I can see it rising above your heads!’ he said jovially. ‘But don’t worry – I’m not in the mood to do anything about it now. I’ll just bring it up next Parents’ Evening.’

Tom winked at them and carried on down the slope in the direction of the building. ‘Not that your single, pregnant mothers would ever turn up, of course,’ he added, beneath his breath.

‘I’m not taking music next year anyway, Langston!’ a girl shouted.

‘That’s a shame because you’d do really well,’ Tom called over his shoulder.

‘Yeah, well I’m not taking it anyway,’ she replied, the sarcasm wasted.

Tom chuckled. If she even makes it to the end of Year 11 without being expelled or having a baby it’ll be a miracle, he thought.

‘What happened to your face?’ one of the lads cried. ‘Did your wife batter you?’

‘No, it was Pamela Anderson. I told her she was rubbish in Baywatch!’

The wannabe older kids laughed, and then their voices descended into whispers as they huddled up.

‘Or was it Shaun Bratcher?’ a different boy called after him.

Tom stopped in his tracks and turned around. ‘And why would you say that?’

‘We saw you on the news yesterday,’ said the lad, giggling. ‘They said you were on the run from the police.’

Hilary gets her Comeuppance

‘Really?’ Tom’s heart was racing. ‘Are you sure they weren’t talking about someone else?’

‘I don’t know anyone else called Tom Langston who teaches at this school, sir!’

‘Good point. However, sorry to disappoint, but as you can see – I’m not running anywhere!’

Tom shook his head, laughing merrily as if the whole notion of him being on the run was absurd, and told the scruffy set of Year 9s to stop hiding their cigarettes up their sleeves before they set themselves alight. They quietened for a moment, wondering whether that meant they should stamp the butts out or smoke openly, but they were not about to be brushed off that easily. Seeing one of your teachers on the news in connection with the death of someone at your own school was far too exciting, and despite being pretty obtuse, they suspected that might be the reason he was coming in through the woods.

‘Where were you yesterday, Tom?’ the first boy enquired, grinning antagonistically.

‘Not that it’s any of your business, but my mother was taken ill on Sunday night and I had to go and see her,’ Mr. Langston replied matter-of-factly. ‘And don’t call me Tom unless your brain is smaller than a pea and your mum ties your shoelaces.’

‘Bye, Tom!’

Tom could hear them chanting “murderer” after him, as he left the cover of trees and headed for the main building, and realised that, if he ever returned to the school, he would have a long battle to rid himself of his association with the tragedy. It occurred to him that Hilary must have known about the broadcast when he spoke to her yesterday and, by

pretending she didn't, was giving him the rope with which to hang himself. What a surprise! he thought, taking the route along the north corridor and up the east stairs to avoid an encounter with a pupil or member of staff. After raising a questioning eyebrow at his dressings, the Head's PA told him to go straight through and wait in the office until Hilary got back from her meeting. Tom slipped by gratefully, closed the door, and made himself comfortable.

After a few minutes of wondering idly what game plan the detestable witch had in mind, Tom got bored and began to snoop about. There was an unremarkable assortment of educational books and folders on some shelves next to her uncluttered desk. On this, perched a photo of two elderly folks standing with their arms around Hilary and another similarly heavy-set, middle-aged woman in front of a bungalow. Must be her sister, Tom thought. Another, much smaller photo of an unattractive smiling lady in a quaint little frame stood discretely in a corner, and Tom smiled back at her as he guessed the nature of her relationship with Hilary.

In the centre of the desk sat a scuffed, unlabelled ring binder that looked as though it had been put there for a purpose. Tom minded it quizzically, then glanced over his shoulder and calculated that if he heard the Head come through the outer door, he would have time to close the folder and return to his seat before she entered. Spinning the folder a hundred and eighty degrees, he opened the cover and started scanning. His name was written in foreboding capital letters at the top of the first page, and in the margin, a list of dates sub-headed a description of every one of his misdemeanours since the beginning of term. The first was dated September 3rd and comprised a single sentence stating time of arrival at staff briefing as 8.42am – two minutes late. Tom stopped for a second to

Hilary gets her Comeuppance

think back and couldn't remember a single instance of Hilary addressing his lateness for any briefing or, for that matter, of anyone else getting into trouble for it. On the first page alone, there were at least half a dozen citations of lateness for various things and the same number of other minor infractions – and that was just for the first two weeks! He turned the page and the list went on. In intricate detail, she had set down page after page of peccadilloes and more serious acts of misconduct, all dated and signed as if to formalise and authenticate the document.

With a pang of guilt, the first thing that sprung to Tom's mind was the possibility that Julian had acted as an informant, but he quickly dismissed the notion. If that were true, it would have required the cooperation of several other members of staff, each of whom had expressed Julian's dislike of the Head, and, more significantly, a complete misinterpretation of his character. Then it hit home, given that she must have worked alone, what a clandestine, calculated and underhand thing she had done. Tom had always thought that she didn't like him, but he hadn't realised the extent of her animosity and it was shocking to discover how rapidly she had made her judgement. He wondered if she kept tabs like this on anyone else, but laughed – she couldn't have – there weren't enough hours in the day!

He heard the PA greet the Head outside and just about managed to close the ring binder and leap to his seat before the handle turned and Hilary strode in.

'Good God!' she exclaimed in genuine surprise when she saw Tom's face. 'What happened to your face?'

'Bad case of acne,' Tom joked. 'No. I literally got run over.'

Stop Talking

Hilary looked him up and down and noticed that he was wearing gloves, which looked stretched as though accommodating hands that were morbidly distended.

‘Have you hurt your hands?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ Tom replied, without removing the gloves or offering explanation.

Hilary thought it too insensitive to ask how, exactly, getting run over, however literally, had led to both of his hands getting so badly injured and the stripy array of plasters over each cheek. She did, however, know he was lying about his mother being ill and decided to pursue this tall tale instead.

‘I’m sorry about your mother. How is she?’

Tom fought to stop himself smiling at Hilary’s false concern and decided to have some fun.

‘She’s quite poorly, actually, but it doesn’t appear to be life threatening anymore. I’m going back to visit her in half-term.’

Hilary nodded gravely and put on a passable expression of sympathy. She was buying time to figure out a way of enticing Tom to say something incriminating without his knowing it was engineered. If at all possible, Hilary wanted a clean victory over this young man, and that did not include him finding out about her conniving machinations.

‘What is wrong with her, if you don’t mind me asking?’ she asked innocently.

‘You al... They’re not sure yet. They’re doing tests.’

Hilary had once been a nurse and was hoping to catch him out with a mismatch of symptoms, but he was being too vague.

‘So did the accident happen near the hospital your mother’s in?’

Hilary gets her Comeuppance

‘Yes – I was very lucky!’

Hilary nodded again thoughtfully, and Tom could almost hear her rusty old cogs grinding as she desperately tried to avoid coming clean.

‘How did you manage to get back to Brentmouth in that condition?’ she asked, after an awkward pause.

‘Same way as I went out – by train.’

Hilary couldn’t think of a way to force a flaw in his story, so she abandoned the sneaky method and decided to come out with it.

‘OK. I didn’t want to presume that you were ly... misleading me about your mother,’ she began, unable to look him in the eye, ‘but I had a phone call from the police early yesterday morning, and they said they wanted to come to the school and listen to the messages on the answering machine. Yours was the only one on it, apart from one from Mrs. Stanton, and they wrote it down and left.’

Tom was enjoying the Head’s discomfort immensely and was looking forward to the second round when she would try to exercise her power and dole out his punishment.

‘So presumably you’ve invited Mrs. Stanton in about her message too?’ he asked.

‘I don’t think she would have anything to do with...’

‘With what?’ Tom leapt on the error like a cat.

‘With um...’ Hilary faltered, knowing it was too late to backtrack.

‘Shaun Bratcher?’ he asked, flashing a knowing smile.

Hilary realised how unprofessional she must look in her deceit about what she knew and hoped her furtive tactics to expose the lies in his story weren’t too obvious.

Stop Talking

‘Don’t worry, Hilary,’ Tom said comradely. ‘I know you saw the news broadcast – everybody has. Just tell me what you are going to do about it.’

‘I think you should resign.’

‘I’m not going to do that.’

‘Well you can’t just appear on Southwest News, wanted in connection with the death of one of the school’s pupils, and expect to carry on as normal!’

‘I don’t. I expect to be given compassionate leave until this is all resolved and then return to school with my name vindicated which, especially in view of my injuries, won’t be ‘til at least November.’

‘Mr. Langston!’ Hilary exploded, as if he’d just asked her for a one-night stand. ‘Not only will you have your pay docked for missing work yesterday without good reason, but you will be given a formal warning and a record of misconduct because you lied about it as well!’

‘A most generous compromise. Negotiations going very amicably.’

‘Mr. Lang...’

‘Just add it to all those you already have then!’ Tom interrupted, slinging a hand at the folder on her desk.

‘Oh, so you’ve been snooping about, have you?’

‘Hardly worse than keeping a secret record of each and every one of my tiny misdemeanours since I started.’

‘So you think you should get away with persistent sloppiness and poor lessons, do you?’

‘In the conditions I’ve been working, down in those nasty, run-down little huts, alongside a man who has ten years’ experience and still resigned owing to those same conditions – yes.’

Tom wanted to go further into what exactly he meant by ‘conditions’ but didn’t want to cast aspersions about his HoD in front of the Head, even if he was leaving.

‘Well I think that your expectations of yourself and what is required as a teacher should have been drastically higher.’

‘The expectations I had of myself were fine,’ Tom contradicted smoothly. ‘It was the ongoing persecution from you combined with the stress of working at one of the worst schools in England that ultimately brought me down. I worked at an extremely difficult school in London, no less, before coming here, and I coped with it as well as anyone.’

‘I find that very hard to believe, Mr. Langston, I really do.’

‘Well you would, wouldn’t you? You black-marked me in the first week, despite the fact that you appointed me, and from that point on you recorded every negative thing I’ve done. I didn’t see any positive things in your folder, which means you clearly weren’t interested in those.’

‘Let’s face it, Mr. Langston, there haven’t been many.’

Tom wished at this point that he’d thought to bring a Dictaphone to the meeting to record their conversation. Although still new to education, he was certain that if the governors heard her speak so disparagingly to a member of staff, they would take serious issue. Tom uncrossed his legs and sat up. It was time, finally, to give this insufferable cow a taste of her own medicine.

‘OK, Hilary,’ he began calmly. ‘Why don’t we talk about the sort of job *you* are doing? In the two years you have been Head, GCSE results

Stop Talking

have slipped from thirty-five per cent A* to C grades to twelve per cent, causing the school to lose its bid for a sixth form. It now performs comparably with some of the toughest schools in the most deprived inner-city areas of the country. Through constant pressure and bullying, you have successfully hounded at least three teachers, to my knowledge, out of here and are currently working on several others, me included. In only the time I have been an employee, two teachers have been declared psychologically unfit to work through stress-related illness, and many more are suffering emotionally and professionally as a direct result of teaching at the school. Several members of staff I know, again, including me, have been involved in false allegations of abuse. There are up to twenty fire alarms a week and no measure that has been put in place – and some have been laughable – has had any effect, so we are now forced to break the law by not responding to them. It is generally agreed that a significant number of classes from Year 8 upwards are unteachable. No learning is taking place in these classes, and a successful lesson is one in which there are no breakages or fights. Nearly every member of staff, if not all, has been told to fuck off this term, and I know of two who have been physically assaulted. But,’ Tom paused, reflecting, ‘perhaps the most significant fact of all, particularly for you, is that in the six weeks I have been here, I have not heard anyone – pupil, parent, or teacher – offer a single positive word about you. Not one. Either people keep their mouths shut or, as in the case of the overwhelming majority, totally denigrate your abilities as a Head. I was told that you went for something like forty interviews before the desperate governors and dispassionate local education authority of Devon finally made your improvident dream come true. And I was told that by someone you probably think of as a trusted

ally. Nobody wants you here, Hilary, and pretty soon action will be taken to ensure you aren't.'

Hilary had turned the colour of beetroot during Tom's denunciation. It had been delivered with the unvarnished straightforwardness of a verbal report to obtuse parents about their incorrigible child. The glaring truth in what Tom Langston had said was hard enough to hear, but his manner was so cool it was as if he were telling her "FYI". The indifference he radiated to whatever vindictive consequences Hilary could think up was permeating the room, and she suddenly felt utterly powerless.

'How dare you!' was all she could say at the end, and even that lacked the ominous sibilant tone she intended. Instead, it sounded more like a croak.

'Because of you,' Tom answered simply. 'You have ensured that, with absolute thoroughness, our professional relationship has irretrievably broken down. Now that you have lost the ability to affect me in any personal or meaningful way, I am able to speak my mind candidly. And, as long as it's not outwardly or inherently rude or derogatory, there's very little you can do about it except hate me as much as you already do.'

There was another silence as Hilary digested his rather incontrovertible standpoint.

'You will not see me out of this place, Mr. Langston,' she whispered, jabbing her forefinger on the surface of the desk with each word. 'I'm going to make you regret saying that to me. You have no right to speak to me like that. How dare you! You have a fight on your hands, I promise you!'

Stop Talking

‘Empty words, Miss Clarke, but if you want to think of it as a fight between you and me, go ahead. Just don’t be surprised if when you come to me, all seething with anger and foaming at the mouth, you find me laughing my arse off.’

Determined to have the last word, Tom stood abruptly and walked out of Hilary’s office. He glanced at the secretary as he passed and saw that her eyes were shining in admiration. His heart rushed with a feeling of immense triumph that was so uplifting he felt as though he were walking on air. He had faced up to his enemy and spoken his mind fluently, eloquently, and without a shred of anger and, in doing so, had risen above her to a position of power and invulnerability. It felt good. It felt wonderfully, wonderfully good.

Security in Knowing

Tom was sound asleep when a clicking noise woke him sharply. He stiffened and laid absolutely still, ears pricked. He heard weird sounds in the old building all the time, but the click was very loud and sounded as if it were coming from outside in the hall. Curiously, no other sounds followed. If someone were coming in through the entrance to the building, they would undoubtedly make other noises as they made their way to their flat. It was cloudy and no moonlight filtered through Tom's curtains, yet he still stared wide-eyed into the darkness, holding his breath while the seconds wore on. He relaxed a little as no further disturbances were detectable, but then he heard a distinct scraping coming from the corridor. Tom's heart leapt and started beating so loudly he could hear it pulsing in his ears. He was paralysed for an instant as fear gripped him, then, with a flurry of bed sheets, Tom suddenly sprung out of bed in his boxers and hugged the wall. Instead of groping around for the light switch with his bandaged hands, he edged his way along the corridor until he was standing in front of the door. He hadn't bothered to pull the living room curtains shut that evening, and the street lights lit the area

Stop Talking

sufficiently for Tom to see a piece of pliable squash bottle plastic inserted between the door and its frame. Whoever had hold of the plastic was moving it back and forth in a jerky, but methodical sawing motion, presumably in an attempt to prise the Yale lock open. Tom tiptoed stealthily into the kitchen and pulled a knife gingerly from the rack. It was difficult to get a firm grip, and it hurt his hands to strain against the lint, but he gritted his teeth and stole back along the corridor and into the bedroom. Tom hastily gathered the sheets in a bundle and placed them under the duvet to make it look as if he were sleeping. He just had time to rearrange the pillows to look like a torso and head and hide behind the bedroom door before the familiar, barely discernible, fairy-wail of the spring hinge floated over from the other side.

There was a deathly silence, and then Tom heard the padding sound of slow, delicate footsteps on carpet, inching toward the bedroom. This was no burglary, he realised. The door to his room was half open, so there was a sliver of light coming from the corridor that fractionally illuminated his room. An arm stretched gradually through the doorway, passing his face by inches. At the end of it, black and indistinct, a gun pointed at his bed. A short, slightly built man edged sideways into the room until he was poised directly under Tom's nose. Tom held his breath.

'Hey,' the intruder hissed.

Not a whisper disturbed the stillness in the building. It was as if it too were holding its breath.

'Hey,' he repeated more loudly.

The pressure began to build inside Tom's lungs as they yearned for oxygen. The intruder stood motionless for a few moments, debating his next move. Then, cautiously, even nervously, he bent down and prodded

the mound beneath the bed sheets with his gun. The barrel sunk into the duvet and the pillows beneath, and the man paused, uncertain. He tried prodding higher up but again met with no resistance. Alarmed, he drew back swiftly. At that moment, Tom could hold his breath no longer and, letting loose a guttural explosion, slammed the handle of his knife into the back of the intruder's neck. With a small, high-pitched cry, the man dropped the gun and slumped to the floor, whereupon Tom scrabbled around the wall and flicked on the light switch. He picked up the gun carefully and, using the scanty knowledge he had derived from films, managed to flip the safety. Scrambling rapidly in the dark to capitalise on his advantage, he straddled the prostrate form and examined his victim. What lay beneath, stunned and moaning, resembled a black-clad ninja from an oriental spy movie. For a second, Tom wondered if somehow he'd become embroiled in some sort of international espionage plot and was in far above his head. Nevertheless, as the disguised figure came round and started to struggle, he had no option but to take charge of the situation. He rolled the man onto his front, gripped the balaclava between his teeth, and yanked roughly. There was a tearing noise, but it seemed to be attached to something and held firm. He pulled harder and the intruder screamed as the mask came away and revealed a mass of long blonde hair, bunches of which now protruded from Tom's mouth.

‘What the fu..!’ he exclaimed. Despite the incongruity of the circumstances, Tom stopped himself as he stared incredulously at the girl straining helplessly beneath his weight. Beside the fact that he was spitting strands of hair everywhere, it felt improper to use foul language in front of a pupil.

‘Aimee Hampshire! What are you doing here?’ he asked lamely.

Stop Talking

‘Come to kill you,’ spoke a menacing voice from behind.

Roy brought a rolling pin down on top of Tom’s head and knocked him unconscious. Together, he and Aimee dragged their teacher’s limp body through to the living room, where they propped him up on the settee.

When Tom came to, a trail of blood was beginning to dry on the side of his pounding skull, and his body racked with nausea. Roy and Aimee were sitting opposite him on the coffee table, breathing in shallow gasps and looking scared to death. She held the gun falteringly at his bare chest, while Roy gripped a sheath knife so hard his knuckles were white. His other, damaged hand held Aimee’s as they sat there trying to keep the other composed.

‘You killed my brother!’ Roy growled, eyes filled with hatred as he regarded their hostage. Tom groaned in reply, struggling against the terrible stabbing pain in his head.

‘I said you killed my brother!’ he repeated, raising his voice.

Tom looked from to the other schoolchild with pity. Roy glowered at him unflinchingly, but Aimee averted her eyes in shame. She managed to keep the weapon aimed in Tom’s general direction but it was trembling so violently it was liable to go off by mistake at any second. It must be weird to break into the home of one of your teachers and hold him at gunpoint, Tom mused, as he returned his attention to Roy.

‘What do you want me to say, Roy?’ he asked quietly.

‘Tell me that you did it!’ Roy’s voice was dry and cracked with nerves. ‘I want to hear you say you did it!’

‘Why? So you can muster the courage to shoot me?’

‘I already have the courage!’ he snarled. ‘Anyway, I already know you did it.’

‘So why do you want to hear me say it, then?’

‘I just fucking do, OK? You fucking prick!’ Roy shouted, trying to work himself up into a rage. ‘I’m going to fucking kill you!’

‘Are you?’ Tom questioned with a hint of contempt. ‘Or are you going to get Aimee to do it? What are you doing here, Aimee?’ Tom turned to face her. ‘What have you got to do with any of this?’

‘She’s my girlfriend!’ Roy blurted. ‘She wanted to be here.’

‘Is that true, Aimee?’

Aimee opened her mouth but Roy cut her off.

‘She’s here because she wants to be here!’ Roy spluttered furiously. ‘You killed my brother! You are going to pay, you asshole!’

Tom ignored him. ‘Aimee, look at me,’ he said quietly.

She shook her head but his authority won over. Her eyes were red and tearful, and Tom could see through them like a window to the tortured spirit of her soul. He focussed intently on those eyes as he tried to break Aimee’s will, knowing his life could depend on it.

‘Aimee, you are pointing a gun at your teacher. If that goes off you will kill your teacher. You will go to prison for murder, and when you come out, you will be nearly twenty years older than I am now. You will only see your family through a pane of glass, and you will never see Roy again.’

The prospect of losing Roy struck a visible chord, and Aimee loosened her grip on the gun.

‘Aimee!’ Roy barked, realising that the situation was getting even further out of control. ‘Don’t listen to him, Aimee! It’s not true! We’ll be together no matter what!’

Stop Talking

Aimee turned toward her boyfriend, tears sliding down her pale cheeks.

‘I don’t want to be without you, Roy,’ she sobbed. ‘I’ll do anything you want, but not if it means we can’t be together.’

‘You will never see him again, Aimee,’ said Tom calmly, given the peril he was in. ‘You will be locked up in separate prisons for so long you will forget what he even looks like.’

Aimee searched Roy’s face for a sign that this soft-speaking, reasonable-sounding man was lying but saw nothing other than fear.

‘I can’t do it, Roy,’ she cried. ‘I’m sorry!’

She dropped the gun on the floor and dissolved into fits of wailing. Roy lunged forward and instinctively tried to pick it up with his mutilated right hand, but without the use of three fingers, the weapon was too slippery and heavy to grasp, and he dropped it. Tom saw his chance and dived, smothering the gun with his body and protecting his head against blows with his arms. He knew full well that he too would struggle to handle the weapon in his present condition, let alone get a finger on the trigger. Roy tried to turn his captive over but without the proper use of his right arm, he hadn’t the leverage or the strength.

‘Help me, Aimee!’ he implored. ‘Help me!’

But the broken fourteen-year-old had passed into a state of such emotional and psychological trauma that she couldn’t move and just sat there shaking uncontrollably.

‘Help me!’ Roy screamed, but again his plea brought no response.

Roy emitted an animalistic roar and plunged his knife into Tom’s back where it struck his shoulder blade and lodged a mere inch deep, wobbling grotesquely. Roy saw the ineffectiveness of the blow but did not

attempt to pull the knife out. Castrated, finally, by his threshold for violence and gore, he grabbed Aimee's hand and tried to haul her toward the door. Still incapacitated, however, she collapsed and fell on her face in a quivering ball. Roy knelt down beside her and, as if the rest of the world had suddenly ceased to exist, spoke to her in smooth, dulcet tones. Tom could not hear what was said, as he lay cradling his head, but it must have worked because she gradually uncoiled in front of him and rose to her feet. Hand in hand, the couple stepped unsteadily over their teacher and loped out of the building into the night.

For several minutes, Tom rested motionless on the floor. He had felt the impact of the knife as it hit his shoulder blade, and although it hurt like nothing more than a solid punch in the back, he was afraid to move in case he did more damage. He felt dizzy as he stood up and felt the stinging pain of the blade cutting into his flesh with its weight. Taking a deep breath, Tom walked into the bathroom and looked grimly in the mirror, afraid of what he might find. A prodigious stream of blood was soaking into his boxers from the wound, and to his surprise in the gruesome circumstances, he instantly got a feeling of *déjà vu*. With adrenaline fuelling his over-wrought body he was in no mood to dwell on it, however, and Tom allowed himself a little smile as he regarded himself in his reflection. He had to admit he looked faintly ridiculous standing there half-naked with a sheath knife protruding from his back. It reminded him of some sort of low budget black comedy. Would this be the last time someone tried to kill him, he wondered? Twice was enough for a lifetime.

The knife was plugging the wound to a degree and thereby staunching the flow of blood, but Tom could see that it had not pierced that deeply, and the edge was pushing up underneath his flesh to create an

ugly white ridge. In an effort to get a better view, he played with the doors of the mirror, crying out as the blade sliced further into his taut, stretched skin.

As the adrenaline began to wear off, Tom felt increasingly anxious of the pain he may have to endure if he left the blade where it was and decided to dislodge it from his shoulder before it got any worse. Unfortunately, through his exercise at the gym, Tom was too inflexible to reach the blade with either arm, and in any case, his bound hands in their clumsiness might only exacerbate his predicament. The blade entered his back vertically, he observed, so to hit it from the side would cause his flesh to open up and act like a chisel in the bone. To hit it from above or beneath might lengthen the wound, but the damage would remain superficial. Tom crouched down beside the hand basin with his back to the wall, so that the handle of the knife was underneath the rim, and pushed slowly upwards. The handle caught under the rim, and as he predicted, the underside edge of the blade drove into the flesh below the wound. Tom grimaced and strained and beads of sweat broke on his brow before he succumbed to the agony and knelt back down. Maybe it was deeper than he thought. Suddenly, grunting fiercely, he rose to his feet in one fluid movement, knocking the knife with a metallic clatter to the tiles. Blood gushed immediately from the hole that was left, and Tom rushed to the wardrobe and pulled out a bed sheet. With a supreme act of will in his pain and debilitation, he managed to wind it tightly around his torso and tie a knot in the ends to keep it secure.

Tom let himself relax for a few minutes as he sat on the side of his bed and waited for his breathing to slow. Then, from nowhere, the feeling of déjà vu returned. Guided by a strange compulsion, Tom walked out of

his flat and climbed the steps to the rear of the building. He opened the door to the fire escape and descended slowly, acting on the command of a foreign but insuperable force. A light October drizzle was falling gently as he moved across the slabs of the patio toward the stone wall that overlooked the sloping back street below. As in a dream, he saw his arm reach out to a slender chink between two stones. Some scraps of paper were wedged between, and, using a rusted tool from the blackened terrace barbecue, he prised the stones wide enough apart to pull them out. Being careful not to fumble with his ungainly hands, Tom unfolded the first piece and saw in the dimness that it was the second death threat he had received. He frowned. He distinctly remembered putting this in his wardrobe behind one of the panels. The next note he recognised immediately as the first – the one he and his friends had pored over and talked about so much. Tom placed both notes carefully back in their hiding place.

The third piece of paper was carelessly folded and the material newer and tougher. Tom had no recollection of this note at all and looked at it with misgiving. He had an awful feeling that he was about to unearth something of extreme importance, and he hesitated. A rook crowed somewhere in the trees at the top of the hill from the disturbance of a passing car, and Tom looked to the heavens. There was no moon, no stars, only the night sky and billions of minuscule water droplets drifting through the phosphorescent glow of the street lamps. The bird crowed once more, and he could hear the lazy flapping of its wings as it flew over his head and down toward Rose Park. In that instant, Tom realised what the note contained and sank to his knees.

Stop Talking

“On the evening of the eighth of October, you killed Shaun Bratcher. You smashed his head against the wall of the Rose Park steps and carried him senseless through the woods, holding him in front of you as a shield against the tree branches. You were consumed by rage and did not know where you were going until finally, by what little light there was, you saw a ledge of rock and a crevice beyond. You sought forgiveness within yourself but found none and threw him down.”

Epilogue

As a new, rejuvenated and whole person, Tom goes from strength to strength when he returns to school after the half-term break. To begin with, knowing the killer is still on the loose, the pupils feed on his ignominy and each lesson is an enormous challenge, but his resilience and determination see him through.

Tom feels that in light of what he now knows is the truth, Roy's stabbing should go unpunished and does not inform the police. Days after the break-in, Aimee begins seeing a psychologist who strongly advises that she stop seeing Roy Welland altogether, and soon, her parents step in and move her to another school. Roy completes his final year of compulsory education on a somewhat indifferent note, and Tom sees him with his ever-diminishing, doomful clique around school from time to time. They do not exchange glances.

Detective Inspector Moss always suspects that Tom did kill the local boy, and it vexes him unendingly that the cunning, slippery young music teacher somehow managed to inveigle his way out of it. He, and his team, headed by the inimitably servile Detective Constable Haseldon,

Stop Talking

follow up a number of other tenuous leads that all come to nothing. The case never goes to court.

The inspector is not alone with his suspicions; Jim and Pete also harbour their own doubts, but they are secure in their moral position and do not voice them again. Tom spares them the burden of the truth and burns the notes on the cliff top overlooking the bay. The sublime feeling of perspective and emancipation that the sea affords Tom never leaves him, and he buys a small boat. Whenever he gets the chance, he takes it out into the English Channel and spends hours floating blissfully with only the sea and the sky for company.

Hilary continues to perceive Tom as an adversary and never lets up in her attempts to drive him out of the school. As the weeks go by, however, staff become increasingly militant as concern over her leadership grows. Shortly before Christmas, a petition to get her removed, with the signatures of over fifty members of staff, is sent to the local education authority. This precipitates a visit by OFSTED – teams of inspectors who evaluate the performance of schools across the country.

The team hired to inspect Brentmouth are verbally assaulted, pushed around in corridors and targeted with missiles, and even before the week is over, it is clear that the school will be placed under “Special Measures” – the most severe and radical sanction applicable. Local papers have a field day with the report, splashing pejorative headlines across the front page and including special inserts in which Brentmouth teachers are vilified, department-by-department, destroying the school’s fragile reputation and plunging it into an all-time low.

Shortly afterwards, a deployment of Assistant Head Teachers is sent to turn the school around but, partly owing to Hilary’s short-

Epilogue

sightedness, obstinacy and belligerence, fails to have any impact. The local education authority begins a long, drawn-out battle with the Head, during which she repeatedly turns down golden handshakes, and insists that she has the ability to pull the school out of its crisis. In the end, however, she succumbs to the pressure and resigns, leaving behind a legacy of pupil power, teacher isolation and draconian leadership. Pete, Jim and Tom all survive their experiences at Brentmouth and emerge the stronger for them, but within five years, each has left and gone on to enjoy the profession in the way that it should be – stimulating, enlightening, developmental, and above all... fun.