

Terms
by Ben Lyle

Part 1

‘Wait,’ I shouted, slapping my hand against the side of the coach. I ran to the doors and looked up through the glass at the driver. Fat, pale and middle-aged, he sat at the wheel like a man drinking alone in a pub. He rolled his shoulders and eyed me for a second.

I heaved myself up the steps sideways, making room for my backpack, ‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘A return to Dungowan, please.’

‘We should’ve left by now.’ He looked down in disappointment at the small payment tray. ‘I’ve got no change.’

I threw down some coins. ‘The train out of Carlisle was delayed,’ I said.

‘I didn’t ask for your life story.’ The dash-mounted machine ticker-taped out a skimpy receipt. ‘This is the last bus,’ he added.

‘Thanks for the tip,’ I said. I hadn’t been to Scotland since childhood but I was glad the welcome was as cheery as ever. Exactly what I needed after six hours on the train.

My rucksack was too bulky for the narrow gangway and I bumped a couple of heads as I inched to a free pair of seats near the back. The coach was half-full of people on their way home from work, but everyone sat on their own and guarded the adjacent seat with handbags or coats or cold glances.

It was a relief to finally uncouple myself from my bag. The air-con nozzle above me responded to my fiddling with a weak hiss, and cooled only the palm of my upraised hand while releasing a faint smell of petrol. My shirt was wet with sweat where my backpack had pressed against me. It made me feel hot and cold all at the same time.

The coach nudged through the outskirts of town, pebble-dashed bungalows stood among solid-looking houses made

from a pinkish stone the colour of clouds just after a summer sunset. Windows still had posters up from the election. Most of them were the bright red and yellow of the New Labour government, a month into their first term in eighteen years – almost the exact duration of my education.

I tried reading the novel I had with me, but closed it on page two. Since I'd finished my finals I couldn't read anything for too long. I unfolded the crossword but couldn't concentrate. On the way up from London I'd managed five clues in total. Often, forgetting about a clue for a while helps make the solution become clear, as if you knew it all along – your brain doing the work without you noticing. But my mind couldn't rest. A graduate, I was in a limbo state between the completion of a degree and the public acknowledgement of the fact. Now that I was free to think about whatever I wanted, I couldn't settle on a single thing. My education was complete, my head empty.

Education is the big buzzword, ever since Blair's speech in Blackpool. It meant so much, he said it three times. I stood at the back of the Winter Gardens and cheered and clapped with the other student delegates. Older party members grinned at us. I wish I was your age, you've got it all ahead of you, they said, we'll be in power for years. And now we'd won. I saw Peter Mandelson striding through the conference centre, the star behind the star – only with too many skeletons to make it to the top job.

Now I found myself coming back to my old school. I had a spare month before graduation, I wanted a spot in one of the New Labour think tanks and I knew my educational past gave me an edge. Visiting Bannock House again might round out my CV nicely. At least, that's what I told myself when I boarded the train at Euston six hours earlier. I tried not to think of my own skeletons.

We picked up speed and cut through a hillocked countryside, criss-crossed by the uneven grey lines of dry stone dykes. Cars buzzed by in concussive bursts. I fidgeted with the ashtray jutting from the seat in front, now only a depository for used chewing gum. The girl on the other side of the aisle tutted

loudly, so I stopped. She stared fixedly out of the window, her face angled away from me, but a couple of times she brushed white-blonde hair out of her eyes. A dark birthmark coloured the point of her jaw and I wondered if she plucked its hairs. She was about my age but wore a shop uniform of a white blouse and black polyester skirt, the kind that made people seem forty. Her cheek raged red and I could tell she sensed me looking at her. She smoothed her skirt over her legs but didn't glance my way again.

The coach pulled into Kirkmichael, about halfway to my destination. I stretched to see the driver, but the steps to the exit were out of view. A couple of shaven-headed teenagers in tracksuits appeared and bundled up the aisle, sniggering at something. Their eyes snared on the girl.

'Alright hen?' the first boy said. His taller friend behind grinned then flicked his eyes at me, challenging.

Her head barely twitched. 'Fuck off,' she said.

'Easy,' he laughed. The lad behind pushed his mate and they collapsed into the middle of the back bench. 'Just trying to be friendly,' he said. 'You look like you could do with a shag.'

I craned my head.

'Got a problem pal?' the tall one said. I swivelled back and looked aslant at the girl. She shot me a quick smile.

'Leave her Jinxy,' the tall one continued to his friend. 'She's a fucking lezza.'

The girl carried on staring out of the window. 'I'm no' a lezza,' she said calmly. 'I just wouldnae shag a wain like you.'

I didn't notice straightaway but someone else had got on at Kirkmichael. At first, I could only see the back of his head, a few seats behind the driver. A rising crinkled corona of dark hair, dust motes swirling above. It made me think of a bonfire. An old lady shuffled to the front, away from him and I soon realised why. The man's smell crept down the coach, a faint but persistent odour of rank neglect, like a long blocked drain. People started coughing and muttering. The girl opposite put her hand to her face.

'Christ that's reekin,' someone said.

I glanced back at the two boys. The tall one sharpened his face for a moment then nudged his mate. 'It's giro day, so it is.' His friend laughed.

We turned off the main road and began a twisting ascent into the Bannock Hills. The shallow valley to the left looked less grand than I remembered; a few fields marked by dark gashes of dried mud, the river a shrunken trickle. I held my nose – there was something oddly familiar about the tramp's smell that I couldn't quite place. The coach's engine struggled against the incline and, as we bent around corners, I could see the dark black flowers of smoke blooming from the exhaust, fading into the air.

'Frumious, I say!' The tramp thrust an arm into the air and shouted. 'Frandsip, frangible.' He swung onto his feet, gabbling and turned towards the back of the bus. His face was a mass of knotted black hair — like a caveman in a cartoon. He wore an ill-fitting suit over a filthy grey T-shirt. Rake-thin, he looked possessed, eyes cavorting as he lurched up and down the aisle gripping each seat for balance. He was rancid drunk.

'Fuck sake, it's the missing link,' one of boys behind me cried.

'No,' the other corrected him. 'It's the weirdo from Dalry.'

'I know that, ya bampot,' the first boy said. 'It's a joke.'

'Get away with ya, the fucking fairy,' the tall boy called out.

'Shocking,' a middle-aged man in front of me muttered. He then shouted suddenly. 'You stink.' Nervous sniggers broke out.

The tramp bowed to the coach and flourished his free arm, the other cradling a large bottle. The girl grasped a hanky to her mouth, her eyes wide, her birthmark stretched.

I saw the old woman who had moved to the front hunch forward and speak to the driver. 'It's no' right,' she said in a loud voice. 'He shouldnae be allowed on. I cannae breathe.'

A couple of other passengers added to the complaints but no one spoke directly to the hairy man. An exclusion zone now

marked out his space in the coach. My thighs scratched against the coarse upholstery.

‘He’s paid his fare,’ the driver called over his shoulder. ‘Jesus.’

Oblivious to the noise around him, the tramp brought the heavy bottle to his lips.

‘This guy’s toxic,’ the angry man shouted. ‘Get him off.’

The birthmarked girl glanced at me but I avoided her eye. I held my breath, waiting to see what the tramp would do next. The bus lurched around a tight uphill corner and he stumbled onto his knees. His bottle clunked to the floor and wheeled along the aisle. ‘Aw fuck sake,’ a voice boomed. The bottle rested against the seat in front of me, a sad dribble of cider spilling from its neck.

One of the boys behind me laughed. The tramp rose and stumbled after his prize. With him washed the stench of undressed sores. I picked up the bottle to hand it to him as he scabbled on the floor, muttering to himself in unknown words. Around us, the condemnation continued. *Get off, ya dirty bastard you. Away to yer bath.*

The tramp’s face bobbed up inches from my own. His dancing eyes suddenly stilled and sharpened as he looked at me. I turned my head aside, the smell deeper and more cloying close up.

‘Bastard!’ he cried and launched his head into my nose. ‘Satan’s son. Beelzebub.’

I fell to the floor, holding my face, as he punched away – bottle forgotten, a whirl of wiry fury. A girl screamed. His fists struck me on the head then on the body.

‘Liar,’ he said over and over. ‘Liar, liar, liar!’

I felt the bus slow to a stop. ‘Get into him,’ one of the boys screamed and in seconds he and his friend were kicking over my head. ‘Fucking nutter.’ A middle-aged man grabbed the tramp’s suit and hauled him backwards. Like a writhing many-armed beast, the man and the two boys bundled the tramp towards the door. The drunken man’s eyes went wild once more.

Blood ran from my nose and my shirt was drenched with cider, broken glass strewn around me.

‘You alright son?’ An old lady held out a paper tissue. ‘Keep the packet,’ she said.

I levered myself onto the seat.

The boys, my knights in shining shell-suits, shouted obscenities at the tramp as they kicked him clear of the doors. Everyone on the bus craned to the right-hand side to catch sight of him.

‘What was all that about?’ the birthmarked girl asked, pulling her fringe aside.

‘God knows. I have no idea who he is,’ I lied.

It’s always a shock, the first time you see your teachers in a different setting from the classroom. When you’re a child, they bstride the school like gods, all-powerful, all knowing, a species of philosopher-kings. Then you see them walking down the high street with their shopping bags, or hooting their horn in frustration in a traffic jam and you realise they are just like everybody else. I remember seeing my first primary teacher, Miss Giddens, sobbing into a napkin in a burger bar one day and realizing the world wasn’t quite what it seemed.

Physically, the tramp looked all of sixty-years-old, but I knew he couldn’t be more than forty-five. He had been in his mid-thirties when he first taught me. I used to be a mouthy twelve-year-old with a comeback for everything, but I couldn’t think of anything to say now as my old maths teacher, Mervyn, stood on the grass verge. He made crazy shapes in the air with his hands and juiced his lips at the people on the bus. Then he mooded, like a Tex Avery cartoon character, and took an exaggerated bow, his anger forgotten. The passengers stared back, hard-eyed and embarrassed, and urged the driver on.

I caught the flash of the top of his head as we began to pull away. The driver crunched the gears and cursed. I twisted in my seat and looked back at Mervyn’s bedraggled figure disappearing in the bus’s rear window.

It was through a window that I first saw him.

*

My best friend Charlie and I sat in the school library on the Sunday before the first day of term. As boarders, we'd arrived at the weekend to settle in and we soon found ourselves alone at work. We shared a large drop-leaf table, its wooden edges striped by the marks of penknives. Charlie had been tutored in science over the holidays and took me through some basic physics. He scabbled around for his proper calculator – the silly one on his Casio wristwatch useless for anything but tiny addition. I turned to the window and gazed out over the gravel, past the sloping football pitch towards the meadow. Grey, green, greener and then again grey — the low dark grey of the troubled Scottish sky.

At that moment a fast-moving figure stalked across the gravel in front of me, his face determined and serious. I watched through the window as he moved around our flank with swift, precise strides. He had wild, shoulder-length hair that rippled in the wind. His beard reached from his nose to the top of his chest and stretched from ear-to-ear unchecked. He came close to the building and I saw amid the inky bushes of his face two ale-dark eyes and a swollen red nose. He looked like an escapee from *The Muppets*.

'It's the yeti!' Charlie giggled.

'More like Rasputin,' I said as we scrambled to the next window.

The stranger bobbed away from us towards the South Gate. 'Who is he?' Charlie asked.

A Canadian voice answered from behind us, sounding American but not. 'That's Mervyn, the new math teacher.' Fran, the part-time cook and sometime politics teacher stood by the open door. The teachers often doubled up jobs; Bannock House was that kind of school, everything a bit vague around the edges. You never quite knew where you were. 'What are you two boys doing in here?' she said.

'Nothing,' I muttered just as Charlie blurted out, 'Physics.' He tugged at one of the ginger curls framing his face and glanced at me in apology. 'My physics homework. From home.'

‘Physics!’ Fran barked. As she pushed chairs around, her fringed purple poncho swished in time with the clacking of her clogs. ‘You’re only twelve. You kids should be running around or something.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with science,’ I said, suddenly feeling bad for Charlie. He always trusted people with his thoughts. ‘It’s the truth.’

‘You majoring in pomposity now?’ She shook her head and turned to Charlie. ‘I can’t believe your dad’s got you studying in the holidays. It’s crazy.’

‘Leave him alone,’ I said. ‘All we want is an education.’

She dipped her chin and looked at me through round rimless glasses, her eyebrows raised. ‘Not now, James.’

‘If this was a proper school,’ I went on. ‘You’d be...’

‘I’d be telling you what to do and you’d have to obey, or face a caning,’ she said. ‘If this was a *proper* school.’ She leant forward on the table, her ringless fingers splayed, elbows bent. ‘Now please, can you guys move out? The staff meditation session is about to begin.’

I opened my mouth to speak but Charlie touched me on the arm. ‘Let’s go,’ he tapped his watch theatrically. ‘We can finish this later.’

Outside, Charlie pointed in the direction we’d seen Mervyn go. I followed his gaze past the wooden tripod-shaped climbing frame and beyond a bristling bank of rhododendrons. ‘You know, I think that new teacher was wearing a tie. Did you see it?’ he said in excitement.

‘I’m not sure.’

‘Let’s take a look,’ Charlie said. ‘I’ll race you.’

We chased after Mervyn. It felt good to run with someone again. I’d spent the summer holidays pretty much on my own, which was nothing new, and had forgotten what it was like to run wherever you wanted, to take off without worrying about the traffic, or strangers, or coming home to an empty house. Charlie made it all seem normal and not stupid or childish or anything. It didn’t really matter where we were going; I sprinted, listening to Charlie’s panting as he tried to keep up.

‘Ooomph!’ he cried. I turned to see him stretched out, face in the stone-studded path. ‘I tripped.’ He showed a scuffed palm, flecked red.

‘Dipstick,’ I said. ‘I told you to get a belt.’ I hauled him up by his elbow. A sunbeam burst through the heavy clouds, dappling his face for a second.

‘It wasn’t my trousers.’ He pretended to be angry. ‘Know-it-all.’ He dusted himself down and all the energy of our chase seeped away. I looked back towards the Big House. I didn’t know when it had been built but it felt too old. It was made from dirty, unbrushed stones of different sizes with only a window here and there. It swallowed the sun. Round about it, trees bubbled like gigantic broccoli. The building looked like an overgrown gravestone in mourning for itself.

Through the nearest window, I saw Fran moving around in the library before she reached up and shut the curtains, banning the light. ‘We’ve lost him now,’ I said.

‘Let’s cut through the Tangle.’ Charlie hiked his loose jeans, folding the empty belt-band over itself. ‘If he’s going to Dungowan we’ll see him on the road,’ he went on, cheerfully. The clouds shuttered, sending a shadow racing back toward the house. I glanced at Charlie. I’d almost forgotten what it was like to have someone smiling full in your face, as if it were you that made them happy.

We struck off the path. The Tangle was a huge triangle of overgrown land off the track that led to the lodge and the South Gate. It stretched to the river on one side and the road to the nearest village on the other. I’d only ever been in there once, in my first term, but never explored it properly. A couple of times Charlie suggested we take a look but I’d never seen the point before.

Trees, bushes and long grass grew together like a complex sci-fi monster. When you pulled one branch out of your face, something else rustled yards away. The ground was wet underfoot, the kind of damp that could never be dry, even if the sun shone for a hundred years. Every footstep squelched and slid. Charlie chattered on about his holiday, about his

irritating little sister and the granny with blue hair and too many hairs on her upper lip. I liked hearing about his family.

‘I don’t know why you bother arguing with Fran,’ he said after a while. ‘You two disagree about everything.’

A branch snapped in my hand. ‘I can’t lie,’ I said.

‘Saying nothing isn’t the same as lying.’

We walked on. It was hard work slashing through the Tangle and we quickly realised Mervyn would be long gone, even if he had been going to the village. Besides, we’d see him soon enough. He was a teacher, not a visitor. Following him through the Tangle was the kind of idea that made sense on the spur of the moment but didn’t stand up when you thought about it. Not when you find yourself cold and damp and dark and not quite sure of the way. We decided to try to get to the road all the same, to see if we could do it. I crawled under a low cross branch, urging Charlie to follow. In the distance we heard cars arriving at the Big House, girls screaming their reunions. It wouldn’t be much fun back there. I could never think of the right thing to say, not without Charlie to smooth things over.

As we carried on deeper into the Tangle the sound of other people faded. I squeezed through a briar and came across a small, cobbled together wooden hut. The older kids often made huts out of cheap timber that the school bought for fuel. Little huts were all over the grounds, mostly in trees, private places for cigarettes, beer and snogging. I’d only ever been in one once before. When Charlie had an invite on Midsummer’s Eve, he took me with him. But I didn’t expect to find one in the Tangle. It seemed strange to drag the wood here in the first place, let alone having to cut your way through to it every time. ‘Charlie,’ I shouted. ‘Over here!’

From outside the hut looked ramshackle and abandoned. It was about four feet high and sat on small stilts at the bottom of a shallow dip in the ground. Long grass wisped around its base and moss mottled the front deck. A piece of white plastic sheeting flapped from the side of the roof. Wicker matting lay fallen from the front wall, its edges twisted and frayed. I grasped the door handle, only to find it had been lathe-turned.

That's not so odd in a school that specialised in craft but still, I didn't know of any of the older kids who would go to so much trouble about a hut. It felt eerie, like a derelict church.

'Charlie?' I shouted again. Something about that smooth ball of a door handle made me hesitate. I didn't want to go in alone.

'James?' Charlie cried, uncertain. 'James?' he called again, in a rising tone.

I stepped away from the hut, surprised how faint Charlie sounded, how far I had come. Following his voice through the moist undergrowth, I finally found him, snarled in a blackberry bush. His baggy blue sweatshirt was trapped in the thorns, his left foot shoeless. He hung there, smiling an anxious smile, looking like the last fat berry of the summer.

'Can we go back now?' he said.

'Fuck off!' a deep Scottish voice boomed across the grounds. 'English poof.'

As I rounded the corner of the Big House the next day I saw Keith, a boy of about fifteen with a pierced eyebrow and acne, gesturing at the log cabin which housed Mervyn's classroom. He swept back his long girlish hair and picked up a rock from the rough path. 'You can shove your fucking equations right up your arse.' He threw the missile at the cabin and cast around for another.

'Don't bother Keith,' Lone grabbed his arm. She was a Danish girl, about his age, with Timotei hair and perfect English. 'He shan't last long. The committee will never stand for such behaviour.'

'It's a fucking outrage, is what it is.' He shrugged her away but stopped looking for another stone. 'He shouldnae talk me like that. Cunt.' The two of them walked away from the cabin, towards me. As they did so a breathless Charlie ran up by my side. 'You two got Maths?' Keith jabbed a finger in our direction. I nodded. 'You tell that hairy fucking cunt that I'll give him the heid next time I see him. Alright?' He swept past with Lone, or 'loan-AH' as Keith called her. She spoke softly in his ear, through the red-brown hair that fanned over his

heavy leather jacket. The coat had M A I D E N studded across the shoulders in small nickel tacks. He'd done it himself in metalwork. They joined a gang of older kids and wandered across the gravel. Bannock House didn't have a dress code. We were encouraged to express our individuality, which meant we all had knotted hair, jeans, colourful T-shirts, scruffy jumpers – it was as effective as any school uniform.

'The heid?' Charlie said.

'It's Scottish for head. He wants to head butt Mervyn.'

'Wow. That's a bit unfriendly for the first day.' He plucked at my sleeve. 'Come on, let's go.'

Mervyn took his lessons in a large log cabin on the edge of the Tangle. It hadn't been used the year before but over the summer Murdo, the one-eyed caretaker, had cleaned it out and it was now the maths room. Windowless on three sides, the cabin was made from round logs like telegraph poles, topped by an inverted wide-angle 'V' of an asphalt roof that reached almost to the ground. Brambles and bushes licked and clung to the cabin's corners. From far way, it looked like it had no doors. It straddled two ridges and under the cabin the ground had been hollowed away even more, almost making a bridge. Charlie and I scrambled beneath the cabin and then up the thick wooden ladder, through the trap door in the floor. I was small enough not to crouch but I imagined Mervyn bent double every time he came and went.

Inside, the sloping roof made it feel like an attic. A watery light came from behind us as we sat, casting faint shadows when the sun penetrated the ever-scudding clouds. The windows were small panes each the size of a shoebox lid, separated by steel frames. A couple were cracked and one was taped up with cardboard. None of them seemed to open.

Mervyn stood by the far wall and adjusted the freestanding blackboard. A small wood-burning stove hissed inadequately and the threadbare carpet didn't even reach the walls.

'I feel like Anne Frank,' I said, getting up to close the trapdoor on Mervyn's mute instruction. Everybody ignored my joke. 'Anne Frank?' I tried again, looking at the blank faces

around me. Charlie smiled but I knew he didn't understand. Lex, a small boy my age with insect-big eyes, lank black hair and clenched fists only glared while the two girls ignored me.

Mervyn tossed each of us an exercise book and began scratching something out on the board, his back to us. Lex picked up a pencil and pulled it back to his ear, like a dart, ready to throw it at me.

'Put. That. Down,' Mervyn said. Lex stared open-mouthed at Mervyn's back. The whole class looked around, amazed, for Mervyn had been focussed on the blackboard yet had somehow seen or felt what was going on behind him.

'How could you...,' Lex began.

'Silence.' Mervyn didn't raise his voice but the word shocked me all the same, coming from a Bannock House teacher. He turned and pointed his chalk-scarred hand at the diagram he'd just drawn. 'Does anyone know what this is?' He stretched out the vowels when he spoke, like my cousins from Bristol that I hardly ever saw.

I sat rapt as he led us through the basics of Pythagoras' theorem. Mervyn explained the diagram he'd drawn, the theory and why it worked. Lex kept fiddling with his pencil, opening his mouth to speak but then saying nothing. Eventually, he tapped the pencil repeatedly against the edge of his desk. Mervyn carried on speaking but paced over to Lex, took the pencil out of his hand and set it back down on the desk. He fixed him with a glowering stare and then went back to Pythagoras. Lex cast his eyes down, too disorientated to offer any resistance. It was weird.

Everything that Mervyn said made perfect sense to me. There was no room for argument – it was correct, and obviously right. Charlie fidgeted next to me though, like he didn't understand.

'You already know what the length is.' Charlie pointed at the blackboard 'It says it's z. Look.'

'Z's an unknown.' Mervyn tapped at the board on each letter. 'X, y and z – they're all unknowns.'

‘But if they’re all unknown how do you find them out,’ Charlie said. He wiped his snub nose, adding to the silver spindles on his sweat-shirted forearm.

‘Look again at the rectangle,’ Mervyn said. ‘The right-angled triangle is always half a rectangle.’

‘I get it, I get it.’ Charlie’s face lit up. ‘It doesn’t matter about the length, it’s the angle that counts.’

‘Exactly so. Well done.’

As the lesson continued, Mervyn prowled behind our desks, examining our work. We were arrayed in a tight horseshoe facing the blackboard, with the windows at our backs. I straightened as he came past me, allowing him a clear view, but he singled out a mole-speckled girl called Jenny and pointed to her doodles.

‘The exercise books are for mathematics,’ he handed her a rubber. ‘Not flowers. Erase them please.’

He stooped over Lex, peering at his scrawl. ‘You need to make the two smaller, so it sits on the x’s shoulder – that’s right. It means multiplied by itself not by two.’ As he straightened, he rested his hand on Lex’s back for a moment.

The bell rang. Everybody started to pack up.

‘What are you doing?’ Mervyn said. ‘I haven’t said you can go.’

Jenny looked up, surprised. ‘But that’s the bell.’

‘I have fully functioning eardrums, thank you very much Jennifer,’ Mervyn replied. He stepped back and flipped over the blackboard, like a magic trick. ‘Here are the set questions for next week.’

‘You mean, we have to answer all those?’ I said, as I began to copy them down.

‘Brilliant. You’re obviously the brains of the class.’

‘I have to work in my own time?’

‘That’s why it’s called homework, now clear off.’ He wiped the board clean as everyone clambered out of the trapdoor.

I lingered. ‘But it’s a boarding school. I won’t be going home for weeks.’

He turned and examined me closely for the first time. Bending his head forward, his eyes rose over an invisible pair of glasses, struggling to focus. His left eyeball had a small red splash in its corner, like blood in a raw egg. I looked-quickly at a cobweb strung between the chimney and the ceiling. It quivered in a draught. Mervyn fumbled at his tie knot. He held a piece of chalk in his hand and rolled it slowly between finger and thumb. A dying fly tapped uselessly against the window, snaring Mervyn's attention. Then he blinked three times and looked at me clear-eyed. 'Don't be smart,' he said.

'If I'm not smart, how do you expect me to do the sums?'

'They are not *sums*,' he said, severe. 'They are *equations*.' He pursed his lips, his dark eyes set and probing. Something about his stare made me cold for a second, like when the sun goes behind a cloud all of a sudden. I grabbed my bag and scrambled through the trapdoor, eager to catch up with the others.

The gang walked past the Big House, straggled together and talking about the class. As I drew level with Charlie, I heard Jenny complaining. She'd set hard and high the chin of her moon-shaped face, something she always did when she wanted to appear mature.

'I can't believe he told me off for drawing a flower,' she said. 'I'm telling Moira.'

Fat Moira taught art. Most people loved the art classes because they could do what they wanted. Jenny had threaded red cotton through her dark ponytail that morning and been given high praise.

Lex kicked at the ground, sending a pebble skimming across the gravel. 'Maths is boring,' he said. 'I hate Mervyn.'

They chuntered on in the same way – even Charlie had some doubts but I didn't care what they said. None of it mattered to me. I knew how to calculate the distance of the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle. Of *any* right-angled triangle, ever. No-one could tell me any different, no-one could argue. Mervyn had taught us something that we didn't need a meeting to confirm.

That term Charlie and I were still Sparrows – the youngest of boarders. The kids were divided into three rough age groups for the purposes of accommodation: Sparrows, Kestrels and Eagles. Although we sometimes had lessons with older pupils, we shared our living space with kids of a similar age. This meant Charlie and I still lived on the top landing of the Big House’s north wing, in the same dorm as the year before.

Painted a dark, oily orange, our room had inexplicable stains on the ceiling and an icy lino floor. Ivy clung to the sills, and the sash windows rattled in the wind. We never got truly warm, partly because the electric heater could only be turned on if you were in the room at the time. (The school wasn’t strict about anything except money.) The best thing about the dorm – apart from not having to share with anyone else – was its position, perched on a high corner of the Big House. One window opened out on the front gravel and the football pitch. From the other window, we could see the muddy path that led to the meeting hut called the Octagon, its curved grey roof visible through the trees. Beyond the Octagon and set on a small hill stood the craft building.

A dusty drive ran beneath the dorm’s side window and opposite loomed a tall tree with hand-size leaves. Thick twisted rope hung from one of its branches with a tractor tyre dangling from its end. Every now and then, one of the girls would lie in the innards half-hidden by the rubber walls. On the other side of the tree, obscured by summer leaves but visible through the bare branches of winter, lay two converted train carriages where the Eagles slept. Years ago, the school had bought the old sleeping cars from the railways. Instead of steaming back and forth from London to Edinburgh behind the flying Scotsman, they idled in a marshy dip out past the farm buildings.

I used to sit by myself at the window, like a cabin boy sent up to the crow’s nest, watching the ebb and flow of the school go about its business. During his first few weeks, Mervyn would stride past the football pitch in the late afternoon and head off out of the main gates. He walked with

quick, jerky movements that sliced through the air, always alone.

One day, about a month into term, I saw him jolting down the drive with the neat oblong of the folded newspaper held out in front of him. He'd kept himself to himself since he'd arrived and didn't even pass the time of day with us outside the classroom. I didn't know whether he was trying to create an air of mystery or whether he simply didn't like children. It didn't stop me wanting to know about him, to see if he knew as much about other things as he did about maths. I rushed from my room to intercept him.

Mervyn was already well up the driveway when I made it outside. He didn't seem to hear me running and I slowed, suddenly embarrassed by my obvious pursuit. 'Can you teach me how to do those,' I called out, pointing at the newspaper as I did so. Mervyn had been staring at the crossword puzzle as he walked.

He turned, surprised. 'I'm here to teach you mathematics.' He looked some way over my head – as if reciting the words from memory. Then he twitched his shoulders to one side and swivelled on his heel towards the gate.

I followed his nervy movements. 'Go on, give us one clue at least,' I said.

He inclined his head towards me but didn't stop walking. 'I don't encourage fraternization,' he said.

'Is that the clue?' I hurried to keep up with him. 'It sounds like gobbledegook.'

'It is not gobbledegook.' He laughed and looked directly at me for the first time since I'd caught up with him. 'Nor is it a clue.' His face sharpened for an instant, like an illustrated stoat or weasel from my copy of *The Wind in The Willows*. 'Good word though,' he continued. 'So much better than poppycock.' He blinked repeatedly, and then fixed me in his sights. 'Now leave me alone.'

I followed him up the drive, past the woodshed and picked up a cricket bat-sized shard of timber as we passed. Down to the left of the drive I could see Fran kneeling in the

vegetable patch and tugging at something. She didn't seem to notice us.

'Maybe I'll bring you up,' I said as I swung the piece of wood in my hand.

He stopped short of the gate. 'What the hell do you mean by that?'

'In the meeting,' I said. 'I could bring you up in the school meeting for being uncooperative or unfriendly or something like that. It happens all the time.'

He angled towards me, his back to the road. 'To the teachers?' His eyes widened in his bushy face, like bird's eggs in a nest.

'Don't worry, I won't with you,' I said, surprised at how scared he seemed.

'You're not another like Keith are you?' he said. 'I had you down as different.'

'No, no. I was only joking. I'm not like Keith.'

He made a deep cawing sound in the back of his throat and stepped out into the road.

As I walked back, Fran trudged up beside me, her muddied hands cradling bunches of green vegetables. She held them like a baby. 'Hey James,' she said. 'What was that all about?'

'Nothing.'

'It didn't look like nothing.'

I sighed. 'We talked about the crossword. Okay?'

'Okay.'

We walked side by side for a moment. The green leaves in her arms rustled and she smelt of fresh earth and sweat. 'Where was he going, do you think?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I didn't ask.'

Getting to know Mervyn wasn't easy. When he did put in an appearance outside the classroom, he never stayed still long enough to share more than a grunted word or two. But about a week before half term, I arrived late for lunch and saw a spot next to him on one of the benches. He rarely ate in public, so I leapt at the chance to sit beside him. The rest of the table, five

or six adults and a couple of kids, were talking in loud voices so I slipped into the seat unnoticed and helped myself to tomato soup from the large communal bowl. Mervyn kept his eyes on the food and didn't seem interested in conversation. I hadn't seen him utter a single word to an adult in the whole month he'd been at the school.

I listened to the others. Fran, Fat Moira and Raymond, a young teacher from San Francisco, were talking politics. Moira shook a tuft of bread at Fran. 'Listen to me,' she said, in a squeaky voice that belied her size. 'This is the political battleground; this is where it's at. Bugger the local education authority – there are bigger issues at stake.' Politics at the table was nothing new – Kinnock's 'outrageous lurch to the right' was one of Moira's favourite moans – but more often than not it was about running the school along correct lines. They seemed to think it mattered to the kids.

Fran's tone was flat and careful. 'Are you saying it's imperative we do something about the gender imbalance?'

I turned to Mervyn. 'What college did you go to?'

'*Which* college,' he said, pumping salt into his bowl. 'Maudlin. Spelt M-a-g-d-a-l-e-n-e. Oxford has a college with the same name but without the final E. After Mary Magdalene.'

'Who's she?'

He spluttered. 'Mary Magdalene? She's in the Bible!' He looked at me for a moment then slurped up the spilt soup from his beard. 'Haven't they taught you anything here?'

'This school's not religious,' I said. 'Unless you count blind faith.' I gestured around us. Mervyn chuckled. It was the kind of joke that ninety-five percent of the school wouldn't have laughed at.

Moira's voice grew louder. 'I still think we should look at massage lessons for the boys and martial arts for the girls.'

'I'm not sure if that'll go down too well with the Inspectorate,' Fran said, her spoon hanging halfway between her bowl and mouth. 'Maybe we should concentrate on some maintenance issues first. And the syllabus, too. If we're not careful...'

Moira slapped her hand on the table. 'Bourgeois,' she said through a mouth full of bread. 'And the inspectors aren't due this year anyway. Show some ambition.'

'That's so right,' Raymond said, tucking curly black hair under his headband. He wore a different coloured one every day, depending on his mood. 'I'm not sure about martial arts for the girls, though,' he went on. 'That's not so peace loving is it? How about something more outdoorsy, you know? Woodcraft maybe?'

Moira closed her eyes and breathed in, one hand clasped around her fleshy neck. 'Don't be so American,' she said after a moment. 'Remember, you're new here.'

'Maybe now's not the time,' Fran tapped a spoon on the side of her plate. She glanced at the kids around the table before addressing Moira. 'We can discuss this in senior committee.'

Mervyn hadn't said anything throughout the conversation, even though the other teachers looked at him every now and then. Not talking made you a bit of a weirdo at Bannock House. Especially when you're dressed in a shirt and tie and everyone else looks like they've tumbled out of a VW camper van circa 1976.

Charlie came over and put his hand on my shoulder. 'We should get changed,' he said. 'Raymond's taking football this afternoon. Except he calls it soccer.'

Raymond looked over at the mention of his name. 'You got it,' he cried. 'Soccer's on me.'

Mervyn collected his cutlery, ready to leave. Everybody had to clean up their dirty plates, even Sparrows. It taught us self-sufficiency and a commitment to the community. As if kids in the rest of the country couldn't clean up after themselves.

'Will you show me how to do the crossword?' I asked him.

He stood up. 'No.'

Charlie still had his hand on my shoulder. 'What is it with you and crosswords?'

‘Please?’ I looked up at Mervyn. ‘You know so much more than everyone else here.’ I didn’t say this loudly but I didn’t care if any of the other teachers heard me. They already knew I didn’t respect them.

He fingered his moustache with his free hand. ‘It’s not a good idea, it really isn’t.’ But he didn’t move. ‘Look James,’ he said, at last. I liked it when he used my name. ‘A cryptic clue usually has a straight definition either at the beginning or the end of it. The other parts of the clue help you to decode the synonym. But beware, the setters are skilled at misdirection. They want you to think of irrelevant things, to take your mind down blind and arid alleys.’ He paused, perhaps uncomfortable about speaking so much. ‘If you are serious about cryptics, it’s best to start with the quick crossword. Now I must go.’

‘You should watch us play football,’ I said, but he’d already turned towards the door. I watched him dump his cutlery at the head table and leave. He didn’t look back. Charlie tugged at my shirt and I saw Fran’s eyes follow after Mervyn. When she noticed me she ducked her head and took off her glasses to polish them on her sleeve. It made her seem smaller and older at the same time.

Charlie and I changed into football kit in our dorm. The school didn’t have dedicated dressing rooms for games. It didn’t really have much money or facilities for anything other than woodwork, art and pottery.

I pulled my mud-caked boots out from under the bed. Charlie unwound himself from his various layers of clothing. ‘We’re going to the Lake District for half term,’ he said. ‘There’s not much to do there but I suppose it will be alright.’ I pulled crusty socks over my Bryan Robson shin-pads. Charlie tied his flag-sized shorts with a big bow and slipped on a T-shirt. ‘My grandma’s coming too – she farts all the time but my mum says we’re not allowed to laugh. She says it’s best to pretend it never happened, because it upsets my dad. He worries, that’s why he sleeps a lot. Are your parents coming up for half term or are you going home?’

‘It’s raining,’ I said.

‘Oh god, it is too. Another mud bath. I hope it doesn’t rain in the Lake District – my sister gets carsick. Why did you ask Mervyn to watch?’

I said nothing as we clattered down the stairs. Normally, I liked Charlie talking about his family but I didn’t want to get into a conversation about holidays, or mention the postcard my father had sent me from New York. That’s where he’d be when I went home for half term. The card made no reference to my mother. She’d probably be out at dinner parties for most of the holiday week, boasting about my idyllic education in the Scottish Highlands and how happy the school made me. Bannock House wasn’t even in the Highlands.

We trudged through the rain to the pitch. Everybody called it the ‘football pitch’ but it wasn’t even rectangular. It sloped from one wing to the other but also rose sharply into a goal mouth and tapered at one end. The splintering goalposts creaked in the wind and we had to collect the ball through gaping holes in the nets.

‘Get a move on Dessie, it’s fucking freezing,’ someone called out.

‘My name is not Des,’ Raymond shouted. ‘For crying out loud.’

‘Sorry, *Raymond*.’ Keith laughed.

When he first arrived from America, the summer before, a rumour sprung up that Raymond was the secret love child of Charles Manson. He had the same dark, staring eyes and flailing hippy hair, so it made sense. I don’t know who started it, but the story stuck for a while until Raymond finally had enough and produced a pale Polaroid of two frumpy square-headed WASPS. He pinned it to the noticeboard with a scrawled note: ‘Raymond’s Mom and Pop. Lifetime residents of Des Moines, Iowa.’ The upshot of this for Raymond, though, was that the kids started calling him ‘Dessie’, ‘Des’ (as in Desmond) or even ‘Square Des,’ which annoyed him even more than the whole Charles Manson thing. He would stamp his foot in frustration and shout: ‘You’re not even saying it right. It’s *day moin, day moin*.’

There were about sixteen players in total, made up of all ages with the Eagles such as Keith shared between the two sides. Like most Bannock House classes, it was run in as haphazard a way as possible. The teacher hardly needed to be there at all. I wondered why the teachers bothered to turn up to classes sometimes, never mind the kids. Raymond towered over all of us. He wore a baggy green T-shirt and his enormous tracksuit trousers billowed around sockless ankles.

‘Come on guys, let’s go for it,’ he screamed, bouncing on the balls of his feet. ‘Soccer, YES!’ He slapped the back of Paddy, a skin and bones Kestrel with a bowl cut. Paddy coughed. We all looked down at the ground. ‘Go team,’ Raymond said, more quietly, once he realised no one was going to say anything.

His curly hair held in check by a wide, white headband, he reminded me of John McEnroe. Except that Raymond was a total stranger to physical grace. He played the game as if controlled by a drunken puppeteer, arms and legs flailing uselessly as opponents charged past him. The one time he did get the ball I slid in and tackled him to the ground before he’d gone far.

‘Time out, time out,’ he cried, making a T-sign with his hands. ‘This game is getting way too aggressive.’

Keith picked up the ball. ‘You don’t have time outs in football,’ he said. ‘And we’re not even timing it.’

‘Whatever.’ Raymond took the ball. ‘I’m taking a free hit here.’

‘But it wasn’t a foul,’ Keith said, hauling me up from where I lay after the tackle.

‘And it’s a free *kick*, not hit,’ Charlie added.

‘Look guys,’ Raymond said too loudly. He stopped, took a deep breath and began again. ‘Let’s keep things fair. Peace and love, right? Soccer’s not a contact sport – so let’s cut out the rough stuff.’

‘You mean tackling?’ I said.

‘Right!’

We carried on but Raymond stopped the game after every tackle. It wasn’t much fun after that. A couple of kids even

gave up completely and took to diving in the mud slick that had formed in the bottom goalmouth. I kicked the ball as hard as I could every time I got it, it didn't matter in which direction. Once the rules had been tampered with, the game felt pointless.

'Over here,' Charlie called from the wing and for once I tried to pass it accurately. As I did so, I noticed Mervyn patrolling the edge of the pitch. He followed the game, I could see, but I didn't know how long he'd been there. He didn't have a raincoat or umbrella and the rain made his head look like a black mop. Charlie went for the ball but Keith grabbed him around the waist with both arms and held him back, laughing.

'Stop it,' Charlie squealed.

I ran over and grabbed Keith's arm. 'Leave him alone.'

'Easy, wee man,' he said. 'It's only a joke.'

Charlie smiled.

Mervyn stood close by, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, oblivious to the rain darkening his jumper. But his eyes shone and his tongue flashed purple through his beard. He half-stepped forward, as if ready to uncoil. Then he saw me looking at him and turned his face away.

'Play on,' Raymond cried, free on goal for the first time in the match. He'd taken the chance to slip clear. We all watched as he bore down on the goalkeeper. He drew back his right leg to strike but as he did so his standing foot accidentally tapped the ball away. His boot swung viciously at thin air, trouser leg flapping, and he overbalanced, falling into the goalmouth puddle.

'That. Is. It.' He shouted. 'I'm through.' He pushed himself up from the ground, mud-soaked. The kids cackled in unison as Raymond, looking like some lagoon creature, stomped about. 'Game over.' He sliced his hands in a crossing motion. 'You guys are totally, totally...'

He picked up the ball and then yelled at us again. 'This is so uncool.' He swept away towards the Big House, the school's only good football lodged under his arm.

‘That is sooo sooo, totally, like uncool man,’ Paddy said in an American accent and everyone laughed and mimicked Raymond’s voice.

As we started back to our dorms, I heard Mervyn say ‘Buffoon.’ I turned back, wanting to know what he meant, but he was already striding towards his rooms. In that one afternoon, though, I’d learnt more about Mervyn than the whole of the preceding term. I couldn’t forget the life in his eyes when he saw Keith and Charlie tussle, couldn’t forget how quickly he turned away when he saw I’d noticed. He definitely liked games.

While classes at Bannock House were often optional, when it came to eating you had to be there on the dot or you were liable to miss out. Not long after half term, and maybe three weeks after Raymond had stormed out of football, I had forgotten about supper one night and hurried down from the library to make sure I wasn’t too late. As Sparrows, we took the last meal of the day at eight every evening – an hour before designated ‘lights out’. We always had the same thing: tea and thick slices of toast spread with St Ivel Gold and honey. Unlike the other meals, we ate it in the school’s huge kitchen. It had two entrances, the main one leading from the hallway and a second one that connected to a scullery out the back.

As I hurried through the scullery, I heard all the usual supertime noises, the clanking of teacups and the card game calls. In the kitchen proper, the rest of the Sparrows – Jenny, Charlie, Lex and a couple of others – sat playing cards, ringed around the far end of the broad Formica-topped table that dominated the room. Three bright lights hung low over the white surface giving it the feel of a bleached snooker table. A black and yellow Aga stretched along the length of one of the walls, for about twenty feet, like a 1950s vision of the future with shiny round hotplate covers, and curved panels on the oven doors. I was about to sit when I stopped short, surprised to see Mervyn leaning against the large oven.

Fran appeared from the walk-in larder and saw me hesitate. ‘Mervyn’s helping out tonight,’ she said. ‘Moir’s had

to visit her mother.’ Moira and Fran shared the job of house-
parents. Each of the age groups had two members of staff who
made supper and put the kids to bed. The idea was to create a
home away from home for children, though who among us had
two mothers and no father, I don’t know. If they’d wanted to
recreate my home life accurately, they should have left a note.

‘Her mother’s ill,’ Fran said.

I took a stool at the head of the table. ‘Fat Moira’s got a
mother?’

The ancient kettle on the Aga steamed hot fog into the
room but Mervyn looked unsure of how to pick it up. He half-
turned towards the hotplate, and then cast around for guidance.
Fran stepped past him with the teapot in her hand. ‘You need to
bring the pot over,’ she said in a soft voice. ‘And pour like
this.’ She emptied the kettle with hands swaddled by oven
gloves. ‘James, you shouldn’t call Moira fat. It’s not nice.’ She
heaved the steel teapot to the table. It looked like the head of
the Tin Man.

A card slapped down. ‘Shithead!’ Lex cried, pointing to
the loser of the hand. ‘Your deal.’

Charlie turned from the game. ‘She really is fat,’ he said
to Fran. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘She’s so fat, she looks like she’s in bed,’ I said. Mervyn
laughed and Fran frowned. Mervyn stopped laughing.

I poured myself a cup of tea and watched the play, though
it didn’t interest me. The point of the game was to lose all your
cards as quickly as possible but with no real skill involved,
only luck. Mervyn twitched and I looked at him out of the
corner of my eye. He didn’t know where to put his hands and
kept glancing at Fran as she moved about the kitchen. ‘Did you
complete the crossword today?’ I asked him.

‘Of course,’ Mervyn said with pride.

I hadn’t seen Mervyn outside class since before half term,
and so hadn’t got far in my quest to learn the secrets of the
cryptic crossword. I pulled the school’s *Guardian* towards me
and started the quick crossword.

‘Shithead!’ Jenny screamed.

‘Hey Mervyn,’ Fran called from the walk-in larder. ‘Could you cut some more bread?’

He shot forward from the Aga. ‘Certainly,’ he said. His hand on the bread knife reminded me of an over-cooked chicken wing, all bone and stretched papery skin. He hacked at a heavy brown loaf but his first effort sheered off halfway down and he had to begin again.

‘What’s a buffoon?’ I said as if to no one in particular. Mervyn struggled with a second slice. ‘Try starting an inch in,’ I suggested.

‘How many letters?’ he replied. That caught me off guard. I watched as he prised a saggy piece of bread from the loaf. His hand shook for a moment, then I realised he expected a reply.

‘It’s not a clue,’ I said. ‘I was just wondering, that’s all.’

The phone rang. Fran moved around the table and out into the hall. ‘Can you put those slices on to toast, please Mervyn?’ she called over her shoulder.

The telephone had its own cupboard, off the hallway. It had an old-fashioned dial with letters under each number and a small lock on the ‘two’. You had to borrow the key from the member of staff on duty and then write down how long your call took on a clipboard hanging on the door. The cost was added to your parents’ bill at the end of each term.

Fran walked back into the kitchen from the hall. ‘Charlie, it’s your pa.’

Parents tended to call at supper – they knew their kids would be by the school’s only phone at that time. Charlie ambled through to the hall. It was no big deal for him.

‘Don’t be long,’ Jenny said. ‘My mum’s calling tonight.’

‘I’m ringing home too,’ someone else said.

Fran picked up her knitting and sat next to me. ‘Trying to call tonight?’ she asked. I shook my head. In my first year, I used to ring home often but it was never a convenient time of day for my mother and father. Either they were out or heading out whenever I called. It had taken me a while to understand that sending me to boarding school freed up my mother’s social life. Once she realised she could do what she wanted while I was away, that stretched into the rest of her life. Her idea of

maternal care now involved asking the housekeeper to sew nametags onto all my clothes.

Jenny turned her attention from the game for a second. 'Why does no one call you?' she said, tossing hair from her eyes.

'Shut the fuck up, melon head,' I shot back. 'Nobody asked you.'

'I was only asking.'

'We're not all motormouths, okay. Satisfied?'

The cards flopped down on the table and for a moment everyone became quiet, listening to Charlie's muffled chatter from the phone cupboard and the rhythmic clacking of Fran's needles. 'I hear Raymond didn't have too much fun at games the other week?' she said after a pause.

I looked down at the tight whorls of wool spooling from her hands, hypnotised.

'James?' she said again.

'Football's too aggressive according to Raymond,' I said. 'We dance now instead. It's non-competitive.'

'Is that the American?' Mervyn asked, placing a couple of bent slices of bread on the griddle. Fran nodded. He chuckled to himself and shook his shaggy head.

The smell of toast, like wholemeal caramel, filled the kitchen. 'Shithead!' Lex called out, and Jenny dashed down her cards. 'Your deal,' he said rapping his knuckles against the tabletop. He looked along the table at me with his big bug eyes. 'Don't you want to play Shithead, shit head?'

I ignored him and tried to concentrate on the crossword.

'Know much about soccer, Mervyn?' Fran ventured.

'Yessss!' Lex said in a parody of pleasure at the cards he'd been dealt.

'Blast,' Mervyn cried, clattering the griddle to the floor as he tried to pull it out of the oven. He stepped back, flicking his burnt fingers rapidly and rushed into the scullery. Over the running tap he called out. 'I used to referee.' I kept my head down but I could sense Fran's interest in my reaction.

She walked around to the griddle and picked it up with an oven glove, still talking to Mervyn through the doorway.

‘Maybe you should give a helping hand in games,’ she said. ‘I’m sure the kids would appreciate someone who knew the rules.’ I looked up at the scullery door, waiting for Mervyn’s reply.

He appeared, sucking his finger. ‘I don’t know,’ he said at last, looking across at Fran. Framed in the doorway, indecisive, caught between yes and no. Fran faced him, about six feet away, and they stared at each other without moving. Although Mervyn was a tall and hairy adult, in that moment he reminded me of myself as a nine-year-old standing in front of my mother and not quite knowing how to please her. I looked at Fran. She had one hand on the side of the Aga, where she’d laid the griddle down, and the other held on her hip, a pose that made her look thinner yet rounder all at the same time.

‘Jenny, it’s your turn,’ Charlie hollered from the hallway. ‘I’ll play your hand.’

I seized my chance. ‘Mervyn’s going to take football next week,’ I said to Charlie.

‘Great.’ Charlie looked up at Mervyn. ‘Raymond doesn’t have a clue.’

‘Unless you want to express anger through the medium of dance,’ I added.

Fran stretched her arms out to Charlie and me in an odd gesture, palms facing up and rising. She addressed Mervyn. ‘Looks like you’re hired.’ She smiled.

Mervyn hesitated. ‘I suppose I’d better find a whistle.’

After supper it was my turn to do the washing up at the scullery sinks. In the kitchen, I heard Fran thank Mervyn. ‘It’s good of you to take on the soccer match. I think the kids’ll appreciate it.’

‘Right, yes,’ Mervyn said. ‘Of course.’

‘You know, it gets pretty cold here in winter.’ I heard one of them shut the larder door and lock it. ‘I could knit you some kind of sweater if you like?’

Mervyn stumbled over his reply. ‘Well, no, I mean, I couldn’t possibly. Your time?’

‘Nonsense,’ Fran said, brushing away his reticence. ‘I can knock you one out in a couple of committee meetings, right?’

She laughed in a way I'd never heard from her before, light and floaty as if nothing weighed very much at all.

'Um, I suppose...no. I really couldn't ask you to put yourself out.'

'Well, if you change your mind. Now let's get these damn kids to bed.' She came through the scullery door. 'Oh God, James,' she said startled, her hand rising to her heart. 'You scared me. I thought you'd gone upstairs.'

'I didn't hear anything,' I said. 'I was drying up.'

She clapped her hands twice. 'Get to bed now.' I saw Mervyn's face appear behind her shoulder and he looked a bit put out, as if I'd done something wrong. I went up the stairs and heard Fran say to him: 'Lex normally needs a bit of extra help. Do you want to take him or shall I?'

'Oh, I'll do the others. You do Lex.' Hearing that made me feel better. I didn't think Lex deserved extra time with Mervyn just because he couldn't brush his teeth properly.

At lights out, Mervyn poked his head around our door with his hand on the light switch. 'Ready?' he said. Charlie and I, duvets pinned beneath our chins, chimed goodnight in unison.

'Oh, by the way,' Mervyn flicked the switch, leaving only the crinkled over-sized silhouette of his head against the hall lights. 'A buffoon is a jester, an ass or a fool.'

Mervyn began taking football every week. He didn't play himself, never even kicked a ball, and wore his usual clothes with the addition of a big silver whistle around his neck. Instead of simply playing a match straightaway, he made us warm up first. We jogged around the outside of the pitch twice while he stood in the centre circle shouting at the laggards to keep up. Then we had drills. He found traffic cones from somewhere and we had to dribble through them. We formed passing triangles. We ran shuttles. Only then were we allowed to play a game, which Mervyn refereed.

At first, some people grumbled and said they didn't turn up to football just to run around but the complaints soon stopped. For the routines made the whole thing more

enjoyable. We began to trap the ball better, we ran faster and we started passing to each other rather than always trying to run and shoot ourselves. Even the kids who hated Mervyn's maths classes loved his football sessions. Beforehand, everybody would swarm around the ball like it was some kind of powerful magnet, but Mervyn taught us to play with discipline. It felt like we were playing a version of the real thing. We kept 'our shape' tactically, stayed in position so our teammates could pass to us.

He was also a strict referee. Although he praised tackling as much as anything else – he'd mutter 'tackle' or 'shot' and so on every time we did something good – he wouldn't hesitate to pierce the air with his gleaming whistle if someone fouled.

One day in November, we turned out to play even though the ground was still hard from the frost the night before. We shivered through the warm ups and Charlie's bright white thighs went as red as his hair. During the game, I played a one-two with Keith and was through on goal when Lex blatantly tripped me, sending me sprawling on my front. Mervyn's whistle went and I turned to see him running over.

'I never touched him,' Lex said. 'He dived. I was nowhere near.'

Mervyn's brow knitted and his moustache quivered. 'Do not lie to me,' he said. 'I had been planning to caution you for the patent foul challenge. But lying compounds the offence.'

'What are you talking about?' Lex pouted.

'A red card.'

'A red card?' Lex still couldn't quite understand.

'Foul play and then ungentlemanly conduct. Two yellows make a red. Obviously, I don't actually have any cards but you get the idea. Off you go. I'm sending you off.' He pointed towards the Big House in dramatic style.

'That's fucking rubbish,' Lex shouted, but he didn't stick around. We watched as he walked off screaming and swearing. 'I'm not playing again,' he cried.

Mervyn placed the ball for the free kick. 'He'll be back next week,' he said and blew to restart.

Once the match finished, I went to help him carry the cones and the ball back to the sports cupboard. Everyone else jogged off to get inside to the warmth. Mervyn didn't often talk a lot but something about the incident with Lex made me think he'd talk to me at that moment. It was almost as if he enjoyed the action of sending someone off and I sensed his heightened energy, his excitement. Like the first time he watched us play. I thought again of his dark purple tongue.

'Why don't you play?' I asked him.

He stacked the red and white striped cones. 'Never been any good at football,' he said. 'Cricket's my game.'

'Let's play that,' I said. 'You can teach us.'

'It's the bleak midwinter,' he said. 'Cricket's for the summer. Good game though. Like life.' Hot air plumed from his mouth in the cold. It reminded me of the smoke from my father's cigars.

'Like life?'

'Do you ever stop asking questions?' he said.

I stayed silent. 'Oh yes, I see, very clever,' he went on. 'Cricket's like life because from the outside it seems to be a team game, similar to football, eleven against eleven. Family, colleagues and so forth. But actually, you're on your own. When you bat, it's you against the bowler and vice versa. Excellent training for life – no-one can help, you've got to rely on yourself. Can't trust the other chap not to nick one to slip, it's you alone against eleven others, trying their hardest to defeat you. Statistically one can measure exactly an individual player's performance. Tough game, being out there not knowing what's coming next, bouncer, beamer, yorker, no one to help. It's lonely.' His voice tailed off and we walked to the southern end of the courtyard in silence. He coughed. 'Actually, football only became popular in public schools because the Victorians thought it a good way to sublimate the, er, sexual urges of young boys. Did you know that?'

'No, I didn't,' I said, unsure what sublimate meant. And what he meant, too.

Mervyn coughed again. He carried the cones while I had the ball. 'What do the other teachers say about your style?' I said.

'My style?'

'Teaching style,' I said. 'You know, telling us what to do and stuff. You're not like the others.'

'I haven't the faintest idea what they think of my teaching,' he said. 'Nor do I care.'

I couldn't believe he didn't know. In a school the size of Bannock House, it was hard to hide anything. The other teachers had made the occasional sly remark: '*This isn't Mervyn's class,*' or '*You can do what you want here, you know.*' I assumed he would have realised. But he genuinely didn't have any idea and, more thrillingly, he really didn't seem to care about what they thought. 'Don't they talk about it in the staff meeting?'

'How dare you imply that I listen to the committee?' He pulled the cupboard key from his pocket. 'I make it a point of honour to ignore every word of the theoretical piffle spoken there.' He struggled to put the key in the lock and then spoke again, almost to himself. 'Do you know, the other day someone seriously suggested playing touch rugby instead of football on the grounds that handling skills are more creative? Risible hebetude!' He flourished these last words.

'Where did you teach before here?' I asked. I wanted to ask him what risible hebetude meant but it might have made him feel bad, spoiling an effect he so obviously enjoyed.

He scratched and fiddled at the lock, the key clinking. 'Hold these,' he said, handing me the cones. He couldn't manage with the key at all. 'Blast, this bloody thing never opens.'

I put the cones on the floor. 'Let me,' I said taking the key from him. I held it as gently as I could, like an injured bird, and the lock eased open. 'It's all in the wrist,' I said.

He stowed the cones. 'That's it for today. Go away and stop annoying me. The school day is over. The sun has dipped below the yardarm. Goodbye.' He sprang from the storeroom and he hurried off in the direction of his rooms.

When I got back to the dorm, I found Charlie lying in his bed. He'd taken his boots off, but I saw he still had on his football shirt. His arms were flat out over the covers. 'I'm knackered,' he said through heavy breaths. The rawness of his cheeks, glowing red outside, had paled.

I sat down with my back to him and pulled at my football boots. 'Can you believe Mervyn?' I said. 'Sending Lex off like that?'

'Did you dive?' Charlie asked quietly.

I kept my back to him. 'Of course not,' I said. 'What's wrong?'

His breathing gradually slowed. 'Maybe I'm not fit enough for football Mervyn style,' he said.

I pulled the woven tartan blanket from my bed. 'You're just feeling the cold.' I stepped over and added it to the pile of covers on his bed and said: 'I think Mervyn likes me.'