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Terms

Written by Ben Lyle

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by

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'The Government's purpose... is to secure for children a happier childhood...'

Introduction to the White Paper on Educational Reconstruction, 1943

‘Education is what survives when what has been learnt has been forgotten.’

BF Skinner

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. ‘Frandship, 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 scrabbled 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 inta him,’ one of the boys screamed and in seconds he and his friend where 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 bestride 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 mooed, 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 scrabbled 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.