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Where There's a Will

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Extract

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Part one:

Kevan, Kelly, Louise

Of Mice and Men

'So why does George see ranch hands as the "the loneliest guys in the world"?'

Thirty-three blank faces. You couldn't quite hear a pin drop, but you could hear a schoolboy fart.

Yup, there it goes now . . . *ffffrrrrrrrpp*. A schoolboy farting.

'Anyone . . . ?'

It's the teacher's first day. He's scared. Of *course* he's scared. No one tried to sell the school as Eton. He braced himself for the worst. Mayhem, basically. Shouting, cursing, that kind of thing. Maybe even a little violence. He wasn't looking forward to it, but he thinks he could have handled it.

Not this, though.

'C'mon, someone . . . *Anyone*. George. Ranch hands. Loneliness. *Why?*'

He looks out from his desk and no longer sees thirty-odd mute faces. No, he sees an arid, featureless prairie, empty save for the tumbleweed . . . And there on yon horizon, a skeleton, brittle and desiccated. It's him after just a few more periods of this malevolent silence. Lonesome cowboys? What about the poor bloody teachers?

Exasperated, he raises *Of Mice and Men* above his head. But what's he going to do with it? Throw it at someone? That would be illegal, wouldn't it?

'*Please* . . .' The word comes out as a faint rasp. He needs a drink. Water . . . Whisky . . . Hemlock.

Frantically he clears his throat. 'Anyone with any opinions

at all . . . ? On anything in this book . . . ? On *anything* . . . ?'

At last a hand goes up. At the back of the classroom. It's the boy who has had his face on his desk for the last thirty-five minutes, showing off the K freshly shaved into the back of his head.

'*Yes*,' the teacher says, way too eagerly, but sod it.

'Can I go for a slash?' the boy says.

The teacher now says something he will immediately regret because it sounds pompous and foolish. But you know, it's his first proper lesson and the words just spill out. This is what he says: 'And what's the magic word?'

A beat, then: 'Abracadabra, muthafucker.'

Now is the moment he should come down hard, force their respect. He knows that – they covered it in training. Or he should laugh.

There are two types of successful teacher – tough and cool – and he hasn't yet decided which he should be. And perhaps because he has been put on the spot, he freezes. Like a rabbit caught in the headlights of thirty-three oncoming trucks. Though the trucks aren't going anywhere.

They just wait.

For what? For him to faint? Implode?

He is saved by the bell, though not literally a bell. In this school it's a siren, as heard announcing air raids in shrapnel-scarred war zones. At its first note the room explodes into life. Desks scrape and chairs tumble as thirty-three mostly fifteen-year-olds stampede for the door.

A full minute after the classroom has vomited its children into the corridor, the teacher is still standing at the edge of the whiteboard. It's only now that he realises he is still holding up John Steinbeck.

K

As the boy with the K in his head zigs his way down one side of the packed corridor, another boy zags a path towards him from the other side. Inevitably their shoulders collide and they bump together against the flow of schoolchildren heading for fresh classrooms and fresh prey.

'Yo, Becker,' says K.

'Yo . . . So?'

'So what?'

'What's the new bloke like, then?'

'He's a fucking cock.'

'Got bastard-wanking-maths now. What about you?'

'Double-pissing-Alvin.'

Double-pissing-Alvin

What is Alvin Lee doing in a classroom where seven mostly fifteen-year-olds in various states of school uniform sit around a large table, work in front of them? Alvin sometimes wonders himself.

'What do I put here, sir?' mutters a girl whose face is hidden behind permanently drawn curtains of dark brown hair.

Notwithstanding the *sir*, Alvin Lee is not a schoolteacher.

'What's it say next to the box, Chenil?' he asks.

'Name, sir,' Chenil says, one eye peering through a slit in the curtains.

'Write your name, then.'

'Why?' says the boy with the K in his head.

'It's a form, Curtis.'

No one has yet told Curtis that his barber, a schoolmate, etched the wrong initial.

'So?' he says.

'Forms are kind of a deal. They ask for information. You give it.'

'That ain't a deal. If it was a deal you'd get something back, yeah?'

'I ain't getting nothing 'cept arm ache,' adds a boy with springy blond dreadlocks that bounce as he talks – Harpo Marx with working vocal cords.

'You usually do get something back, Roland,' Alvin explains. 'Like a bank loan or a holiday or housing benefit. You want any of those things, you have to fill in the form first. And put the

cigarette away, please, Curtis.'

'It ain't lit, Alvin man.'

'Yes, but if Mr Chadwick visits us you'll get another exclusion and I'll get a bollocking.'

Roland laughs. 'Chadwick ain't never coming in a million years.'

'A *zillion* years,' adds a girl whose hair has been sculpted – laminated to her skull with about a pint of industrial-strength gel – with an attention to detail that could secure her a job as an icer of bespoke wedding cakes, but that never, ever will.

Mr Chadwick has not been to ILD since the day he invited the chairwoman of the governors to unveil the small plaque at the entrance of the newly built block. ILD, according to some professional educationalists, stands for I Love Delinquency. That's why Alvin never refers to it as ILD. He always calls it the Inclusive Learning Department. Inclusive Learning is a term that usefully embraces a number of things and accurately describes none of them.

The single-storey building that houses ILD looks like a shoe box. Not to Mr Chadwick, though. He sees it as a carpet, the corner of which has been lifted, allowing him to sweep many of his problems underneath. This is not Alvin's view. He is not yet that cynical – not even remotely. Alvin is fairly sure that any day now the pressure of high office will abate for long enough to allow the headmaster to make a fleeting, morale-boosting visit.

But probably not today. Today is a Tuesday and on Tuesdays Mr Chadwick keeps his hand in at the coalface, teaching a small group of Wood Hill School's sixth-formers applied maths. Alvin's year tens know little maths, let alone how to apply it. They don't even know how to fill in a simple form, which is why Alvin is teaching them, though, as has already been established, he isn't a teacher. He is a learning mentor, a title that covers a number of jobs. From personal life coach at the high

end to mealtime supervisor (dinner lady if you prefer) at the low. Teaching his kids how to fill in a form places him somewhere between those two extremes.

'What are you doing, Chenil?' he asks.

'Putting my address, sir.'

'But you're sticking it in the box where you're supposed to write down your qualifications.'

'The address box weren't big enough and that.'

'And it don't matter 'cause she ain't got no qualifications,' adds Curtis.

Alvin ignores the slap that the girl with the sculpted hair gives Curtis on Chenil's behalf. At least Chenil is writing *something*. Alvin looks at the stunted boy at the end of the table. He has a selection of pens in front of him. He's using them to block out the boxes on the specimen form with colour. The boy is Dan. Three years ago he arrived with his family from Romania. He can't speak English – not a single word – nor can he write it. As far as Alvin knows, he can't write Romanian either. Every week he turns up and mutely decorates whatever piece of paper is put in front of him. At least, thinks Alvin, his colouring in has improved. A year ago he would have gone over the lines.

No one has ever taught Alvin to accentuate the positive; his mind is simply built that way.

Alvin turns around because there is a crash at the window behind him. He is too late to see anything, but the large sheet of toughened glass shudders tellingly. He turns back and scrutinises his students for a clue. They give him a collective shrug. The collective shrug is a genuine phenomenon, a telepathically coordinated movement that only small groups of teenagers, usually in a classroom setting, are capable of. It's worthy of scientific study, though the scientists probably have better things to do.

'What was it, guys?' Alvin asks, immediately before a second,

louder crash. He doesn't turn this time, but looks at the smirks radiating dimly from his class. 'C'mon, what was it? A pigeon? Mr Chadwick?'

Chenil mumbles something into her hair curtains.

'What did you say?' he asks.

'It weren't nothing, Alvin,' Curtis snaps.

'It was Kevan, wasn't it?'

Alvin doesn't wait for confirmation, but turns round again to see the top half of Kevan Kennedy slam into the glass before dropping to the scrubby lawn below. Alvin picks up an orange plastic chair and takes it to the window. He stands on it and opens the narrow louvred panes at the top.

'Are you mad, Kevan?' he says through the gap.

He looks down at the boy, who appears to be winded. He's clutching a thin wad of paper and gazing up at Alvin with his big, black eyes; gorgeous, glacier-melting eyes, housed in a scary killer's face. Alvin believes those eyes could be Kevan's greatest asset, if only he had the faintest clue how to use them.

'If anyone sees you here, that's it, *finito*,' Alvin continues. 'You do know that, don't you?'

'I got that work you wanted,' Kevan says, flapping the paper.

'What work?' Alvin asks.

'You know, the map shite and that.'

Last week's assignment: Alvin asked his class to write road directions to Glasgow, an essential life skill according to the course book. And given how dog-eared their own bit of London's outer rim has become, escape to Scotland might one day be essential. Alvin often despairs for his charges. They are only eight or so miles from the Houses of Parliament, Tate Modern and Bond Street; from *London*, the Greatest City in the World. But here in the Land the Tube Forgot, all of that goes unnoticed. They are Londoners in name only.

All complied with the task, except for Dan, who instead handed in a beautifully rendered colouring of the photocopied

map of Britain. And except for Kevan, who no doubt would have completed it had he not been excluded from school. Yesterday, the head of PE walked round a corner to find him with a gun. He'd seemed to be in the process of selling it to a boy in year seven. It was only an air pistol, but in twenty-first-century Britain, guns of any description are a zero-tolerance, one-strike-and-you're-out affair. He could have been caught towing an anti-tank howitzer through the school gates without making his situation appreciably worse. Whatever he pleads in mitigation, the likelihood is that his temporary exclusion will become permanent. Especially if he's caught on school property before his hearing.

'I think you should leave, Kevan. *Now*,' Alvin urges.

'Can't I give you the work?'

'OK, but then go.'

Kevan hauls himself to his feet and holds up the paper. Alvin feeds an arm through the window slats but he can't reach it.

'You'll have to climb on something,' he says to Kevan.

Kevan drags a wire litter bin up to the window. He clambers onto the rim and reaches up with the paper again. Alvin forces his arm through the thin gap, wondering if the pressure will shatter the narrow strips of glass, perhaps severing a major artery. The tips of his trembling fingers touch paper – just.

'Sir,' sculpted-hair girl calls out behind him.

'Just a sec, Debbie,' he gasps as he attempts to grasp the paper.

'*Sir*.' Debbie's voice again, this time more insistent.

'Hang on . . . Nearly . . . got –'

A sharp crack as a pane cleaves in two and slides free from the aluminium brackets that hold it in place. The two halves drop straight down like a twin-bladed guillotine, leaving Alvin's arm still attached at the shoulder, but also leaving a vertical scarlet gouge in Kevan's coffee-coloured cheek.

'Hello, Mr Chadwick,' Debbie says brightly.

Alvin looks away from the blood that is beginning to flow – make that *spume* – from Kevan's face and turns to look at his class, and at the now open doorway through which the headmaster has just stepped.

'It's OK, Mr Chadwick,' Curtis says. 'Alvin were just telling Kev to fuck off.'

Curtis still has the cigarette clamped between his lips.

But it's alright because it isn't lit.