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School for Scumbags

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Extract

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GAFIN SCHOOL

The Staff

Surnames	*Aliases*
Mr Gregson	unknown
Mr Sharp	Sharpie
Mr Fotheringay	Fotheringstein
Miss Howard	unknown

The Pupils *(by dorms)*

[Wayne] Banstead	Banners
Deakins	Lumpy
Macfarlane	Rat
Cooper	Tramlines
Richardson	Four-eyes
Williams	Lofty
Dunlop	Ginger
Jenkins	Div
Tomlinson	Neanderthal
McCaughie	Big Mac
Allardyce	Doughnut
Holden	Hold'em
Baker	Candlestick
Davis	No Nickname
Kempthorne	Kempy
Hammond	Peanut
Lawrence	Nits
de Buttain	Frog
Macaskill	Little Mac

CH.1 The born thief

Want to know how I got started in this game? Want to? It's a long, strange, winding and quite unbelievably boring tale. Anyone interested?

Well, tough, because you're going hear it anyway.

I guess the real turning point came almost twenty years ago now, when Mr Atkinson, the last of my many headmasters, called me a born thief.

'You're a born thief,' he said, banging the table between us in anger and frustration. I think he'd meant it as some kind of insult, but my chest swelled with pride and a smirk broke out across my face that Atkinson saw before I could cover it up with my hand. That added four extra lashes to the ten he'd already set aside for me (to wipe the smile off my face), but it was really only a temporary solution as I was back smirking about it the next day. In fact it still warms the cockles of my heart to this very day, and my lips are always prone to a curl whenever I think about it.

A born thief. Smart.

See, what the law-abiding, lawn-mowing, respectable cardy brigade never seem to understand is that, for a thief, being

called a thief isn't actually an insult. See, we all know we're thieves: we should do, we're at it often enough. If anything, it's actually a compliment. Mr Pipe, Slippers & a Seat on the Local Town Council might not think so but then that's just because Mr Pipe, Slippers & a Seat on the Local Town Council has a different set of values to us born thieves. Most people have.

Accuse anyone of being what they are, in any walk of life in fact, and they'll generally take it as a compliment, no matter what the insult is:

'You were born to be an accountant.'

'As far as postmen go, you're a natural.'

'I don't think I've ever met anyone more suited to driving the bin lorry in all my life.'

'My, my, you're a big girl, aren't you?'

As mad as it seems, I've heard all of these things and more in my time, not aimed at me, of course, but I've heard them all the same and none of them ever resulted in an almighty crack in the gob, which is quite surprising when you think about it. Even dole scroungers, the leeches at our teats and the scourge of all society, get a kick out of being called scroungers. I've got one mate – Darren his name is – who laughs like a drain every time he walks us through all the benefit scams he's got going because he loves it so much, he loves his chosen vocation. He's a ponce and he doesn't mind admitting it because, as far as Darren is concerned, everyone else is a mug.

In a funny way this is what Mr Pipe & Slippers thinks too. I've heard them in pubs and cafés, on trains and buses, on their way to work, all moaning on about what mugs they are.

'We're the mugs, we're the bloody idiots. That lazy lot lie around claiming whatever they bloody well please and we're the ones who have to go out to work and pay for it all,' is a general take on things, followed by lots of nodding, murmuring and agreement all round.

Well, yeah. I agree too. I always have, and I'm sure if Darren took five seconds to look up from his DSS forms he would too. That's just the way things stand. So what's my point?

Well, not a lot, really. I just thought I'd paint the water for a bit and show you where I stood in the great scheme of things.

See, I'd been at it ever since I was a nipper. When I was growing up, my old lady never had any fears about losing me because she knew she could always find me in her purse. That thing was like a magnet for me and it fitted my hand better than any glove I've ever tried on since. The suspicious old dear eventually took to sleeping with it under her pillow, but three nights running of getting turned over by either me or the tooth fairy proved this was scant deterrent.

So she took to hiding it.

I took to finding it.

She took to locking it up.

I took to learning how to unlock locks.

My old man took to clouting me.

I took to getting clouted. That was my childhood in a nutshell.

I was a disgrace, a scumbag, a liar and a thief. I was all of these things and more, and I knew it. And I didn't mind one little bit.

See, for me, a thief was like a fox. An artful, cunning, tricky, sly operator who took whatever he liked and used his brains and his ruthlessness to get it. Occasionally he'd have to get his brains blown out by the farmer or be hunted down by inbred wankers and torn to pieces by their pedigree chums, but that was just the price of being a fox. If anything, the danger made the fox's choice of lifestyle even more exciting for me, and from as early as I can remember I never wanted to be anything else.

'A born thief, you hear me, a born thief!' Atkinson continued to sermonise, wasting what precious little breath he had left in

that bloated lump of cholesterol he liked to keep his hat on top of. 'If this were back in my day I'd say you were born to hang as well, but there's little chance of that any more, not unless this country comes to its senses again. You hear me, you little criminal? Do you hear me?' he pounded, red with rage and dumbstruck at my villainy. 'TAKE THAT STUPID SMIRK OFF YOUR FACE THIS INSTANT!

'Oh, to hell with you in a handcart. Why am I even bothering? You're a waste of time and effort. This is the only language you bloody louts understand, so let's see how you like it. Now hold out your hands and if you pull them away I'll start again from the beginning.' He swished, before meting out fourteen lashes of good-old traditional justice. My comprehensive school had actually abolished corporal punishment more than four years earlier but Atkinson revived it just for me. I think it may have even been outlawed across the land, I'm not really sure: all I do know is that I was one of the last kids in Britain to get caned and no one seemed upset about this in the slightest. Except me.

I think we got to about seven before I pulled my hands away and I told him he could keep the rest for himself. Atkinson tried grabbing my hands to give me a couple extra, but I pushed him away and a tussle ensued as we rolled around his office, stopping only when I shouted out at the top of my voice: 'For the last time no, I'm not touching your cock!' This seemed to do the trick and Atkinson had to settle for expelling me on the spot, but I think the wheezing old bastard always had that up his sleeve anyway because the letter to my parents was already typed and waiting for me on the way out. Personally, I think he just fancied swishing the stick one last time and knew he could probably get away with it with me. He was fat, old, near retirement and sick and tired of having little bastards like me not care two blackjacks about anything he said, so what

was the worst thing that was going to happen to him if anyone found out?

Not a lot, though that was all academic because at the end of the day nobody cared, not even my parents when I got home and showed them my hands.

'Good. Someone should've done that years ago,' was the old man's verdict. I'm not sure what the old lady thought about it because she couldn't stop crying long enough to share her thoughts on the matter, though they were probably around about the same mark as my old man's.

See, that may have been the first time I'd been caned, but it sure as sixpence wasn't the first time I'd ever been expelled. As I said a little earlier, Atkinson was just the last of my many headmasters; there had actually been six in all. One at infant school (the only place I wasn't ever kicked out of), two different junior schools and three comprehensives. I'd been with Atkinson for only about two terms and he'd already got shot of me, so how did I like those bananas?

Not that he really had much of a choice, to be honest. Not after what I'd done. Want to know what it was? All right, I'll tell you.

I raided the tuck shop.

Woo hoo, big deal. Nothing too terrible about that, you might think. Kids have been raiding tuck shops ever since kids and tuck shops had been invented. The only difference was I raided mine in broad daylight with an air pistol.

'Give us all your money and sweets!' I demanded, shoving the Webley through the little serving hatch.

'You can't be serious,' the kid serving replied.

'I'm fucking deadly serious. Now fill it up or I'll shoot you in the face,' I shouted, shoving my empty swimming bag into his hands. 'NOW!'

I blasted a warning shot into a box of crisps behind his

head and spent the next ten seconds telling him to 'hang on a sec' while I reloaded, but by the time I was ready again he'd closed the serving hatch and ducked behind the counter. The bastard still had my swimming bag too.

'Open this window. Open it now,' I demanded, but there wasn't much danger of that happening any time soon and kids were stampeding in from all corners of the playground to see what was going on.

'Teachers!' Denny shouted at me, so I stuffed the gun back into my pocket and jumped on the back of his chopper. A moment later we were motoring across the car park and towards the gates while half a dozen prefects legged it after us. The nearest was about ten feet behind us, but the road sloped sharply downwards once we were outside the school, so I was confident we'd shake them off. Both me and Denny had our parkas zipped up into snorkels and the bike had been nicked from the bike shed, so there was no way of linking us with the job – other than my swimming bag, which had my name and address on it, of course, but other than that we were in the clear.

Unfortunately, parkas zipped up to snorkels do somewhat restrict your vision and Denny wasn't the greatest of getaway drivers at the best of times so inevitably we ended up the wrong side of the school gatepost with a chopper spinning around on top of our heads.

Half a dozen prefects fell on us a split second later and a couple of tasty boots were landed right in my conkers.

'That's enough of that, get them both up and get their hoods down,' I heard the metalwork teacher, Mr Dalgleish, saying, and eventually a pair of pliers was sent for to yank the zip out of my coat's fluffy lining, and that was that – the tuck shop raiders were finally unmasked.

'Dennis Herman and...who are you? What's your name, boy?'

'Wayne Banstead,' I told him and a collective gasp went up from the heaving mass of orgasming onlookers behind.

'I might've known,' he said, more for his own benefit than anyone else's, seeing as he hadn't known who the fuck I was three seconds earlier. 'Both of you, to the headmaster, now!' A second gasp went up at this, and I could see the awe in the faces of my fellow pupils. It was almost worth getting caught just to see their shocked expressions, but they fell off a second later when Denny suddenly burst into tears and blamed everything on me.

'He made me do it. I didn't want to. I didn't do nothing,' he bawled, turning the gasps to joyous, vicious laughter. That was outrageous, so I pulled out my air pistol from my pocket and swung it around at Denny.

'You dirty grass! Take that!' I screamed and shot him in the chest, making him yelp as the pellet bounced off his parka.

'Give me that!' Dalgleish tutted impatiently, snatching the gun from my hand, and the pair of us were marched off into fourth-form folklore.

I've since heard what me and Denny got up to from people who weren't actually there, but who had heard about it from someone who was, and I always come out a lot cooler in their version of the events, so I never put them straight on any of the details. (In one version the air pistol was a shotgun and I blew some first year's head off with it. Cushty.) All I can tell you is that everything I've told you is as accurate a picture as I can paint and that it always makes me chuckle whenever I think about it.

Denny got off with a three-week suspension and a month's worth of detentions after turning headmaster's evidence on me and I didn't see him again for about three years, by which time he'd got himself a couple of O-levels, a job at Gateways and a bun in a particularly unappetising oven. I never held a

grudge that he'd pinned it all on me because I was the obvious scapegoat and I'd always hated school anyway, so what did it matter? What I was pissed off about, though, was him telling everyone that he'd only grassed on me because I'd grassed on him first, which was a total lie.

I hated him for that; I cut all ties with the little bastard (which I'm sure his parents were devastated about) and I still refuse to forgive him to this day.

Call me a thief. Call me a crook. Call me a ponce, a parasite or even a pipe & slippers man if you like. I can take it. Just don't call me a grass.

I have never grassed, I will never grass and I won't tolerate grasses. I'm pretty sure I'll end up doing most other reprehensible things in life but I won't ever do that one. That is the lowest of the low. The ultimate taboo.

It doesn't even make any difference that everything Denny told Atkinson was true: I did give his arm a little twist and badger him into driving for me that day, but that's no excuse. You have to take a little responsibility for your own actions in life, and everyone has the final say over what they do or don't end up doing. Denny should've faced up to that and taken it like a man. After all, we were fifteen years old, for Christ's sake, not twelve.

Oh, what's the point? It was a long time ago.

Anyway, where was I? Oh, yeah, I think the old lady was still crying.

'My baby. My baby. Where did we go wrong?' she blubbed, as I sat across the dinner from her and the old man.

'You're a bastard, you know that? A little bastard,' the old man was saying, though surely that reflected worse on him than it did on me. I decided not to waste any of my breath pointing this out and settled for giving him my best cocky, defiant look to see how long it took him to jump out of his chair.

Six seconds, a new record. The old fella was really pissed off about something today, wasn't he?

'When you get arrested, when you get thrown in jail, it'll be us who'll have to pay the fines and put up the money to bail you out, you know. Us, not you,' he fumed, which sounded like the sort of deal I could live with.

I kept shtum. There was only a wallop to be gained from opening my gob, so what was the point? Inwardly I was rolling my eyes and wondering how long we were going to go on with this pantomime before the pair of them gave me up as a lost cause and left me to my own devices. That was what I really wanted, to live or die by my own wits and not have to put up with all this awful blanket-wringing that seemed to accompany my every action these days.

I hated it.

I think that was the idea but like I said, people should have to take responsibility for their own actions and I was quite happy to take responsibility for mine, so why did we have to go through all this 'where did we go wrong?' shit all the time?

I guess what it boiled down to was that most parents want their kids to turn out like them and most kids would rather drink from the toilet than give them the satisfaction. It's the classic standoff, and there are some pretty selfish motives at work here on both sides. See, the way I see it is like this: parents want their kids to follow in their footsteps and do the same things they'd done in order to reassure themselves that they'd made a great success of their lives, whereas kids want to do the opposite, to underline what a couple of losers that weird pair who keep turning up on parents' day are.

And it's not just clever clog bank managers who try to steer their kids' futures either: tarmackers, miners, labourers, farmers, factory workers, dinner ladies and housewives, basically people who have really hard, unrewarding, crap lives

will do almost anything to press-gang their offspring into doing the same shit as them, rather than see them go off and make their own mark on life.

Did you ever see that film called *Billy Elliott*? It's basically about what I was just talking about. See, there he is, young Billy, a natural gift for dancing around and not the slightest bit embarrassed about it for some reason, and all he really wants to do is go off and be a ballerina when he grows up. The old man's not having any of it, though; that sort of thing's for girls and poofters, as far as he's concerned. Billy's going to follow him and his brother down't pit and forget about all these airy-fairy notions, and that's all there is to it.

Now, I've got no sympathy with ballerinas at the best of times – let's just say that right from the off – but a kid should be allowed to do what he wants to do, surely. I have no idea if Billy made it, by the way, as I turned over once he started wearing a skirt and kissing his mates. All I do know is that the film was basically about the age-old struggle that's been going on between parents and their kids since cavekids started going around in short loincloths and defacing cave walls.

So that's where I was at fifteen, a natural talent and aptitude for pilfering and precious little encouragement from anyone I knew. Admittedly, my old man (a pipe & slippers man if ever there was one) and my old lady (whose very life depended on what the neighbours thought about everything) were hardly ever likely to support my ambitions, particularly as it was their stuff going missing half the time, but I didn't have anyone else's backing either.

Like I said, I pretty much had to bully Denny into driving for me on the tuck shop job because no one else I knew was up for it. Now he'd hung up his driving gloves I was on my own again. All my mates wanted to be mechanics, or graphic designers, or firemen, or airline pilots (or in Neil's case work

on the bins with his dad – seriously); none of them wanted to rob banks. I couldn't believe it. How could nobody want to rob a bank? What was wrong with them all? But that was just how things were; all of my mates had stunningly mediocre ambitions, which singled me out as the big bad apple.

And I was shunted from barrel to barrel.

And from barrel, to barrel, to barrel...