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Up and Down in the Dales

Gervase Phinn

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I

I stared with disbelief at the object in the display cabinet. It took pride of place amidst the shells, pebbles, fronds of dried seaweed, pieces of coloured glass, bits of driftwood and other detritus collected from the beach.

'What do you think?' asked the nun with a great smile on her round, innocent face.

'It's . . . er . . . well . . . er . . . interesting,' was all I could manage to splutter out.

I was at Our Lady of Lourdes Roman Catholic Primary School, the second week of the new school term, to inspect the English teaching. I had been a school inspector now in the great county of Yorkshire for three years and each week brought something new and unexpected. And I was certainly not expecting what I saw in the display cabinet that cold September morning.

'You see,' explained Sister Marie-Thérèse, the headmistress, 'I like to mount a colourful display in the first week.'

'I'm sorry?' I said, my eyes still glued to a certain object.

'Mount a display,' she said, 'to make the entrance hall that little bit brighter and more cheerful. This year, I have decided it would be about the seashore. At the end of last term we took the junior children, Mrs McPhee and I, on a school trip to the East Coast. We visited Whitby, climbed all the steps up to the abbey, called in at the Captain Cook Museum and had some lovely long walks along the beach. I asked the children to pick up anything of interest which they found on the seashore – shells and pebbles, of course, but also any unusual or interesting items which might have been washed up. No old bottles, though, I had to put my foot down about bottles.'

'I see,' I said, still staring incredulously at the object resting in the centre of the display cabinet.

'And they came back with so many fascinating things.'

'So I see,' I murmured.

'You'd be surprised what gets washed up on a beach.'

No I wouldn't, I thought to myself.

'We've got all manner of different shells and strangely shaped pebbles, polished glass and some amazingly coloured seaweed. Mrs McPhee found some pieces of jet on the beach. It's fossilised Monkey Puzzle Tree, you know. It's quite rare, I'm told. They still make jewellery out of jet. Not that I wear jewellery, of course!' I continued to stare at the display as the nun chattered away. Words failed me. 'It was all the rage in Victorian times.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Jet. I think Queen Victoria took to wearing it after the death of Prince Albert and it started a trend. Of course, it's not so popular today. Oh, and one child found some fossils near the cliffs and another a dried starfish and there's a little seahorse there, see. All sorts of flotsam and jetsam that was washed ashore. Such intriguing bits and bobs. So we have a nice little collection to stimulate the children's discussion and their writing.'

'Sister,' I said, 'about the flotsam and jetsam, the . . . er . . . bits and bobs.'

'And do you know what that is?' she said pointing to the centre of the display.

'What?' I asked, with a sinking heart.

'That little shiny orange pebble, at the front.'

I sighed with relief. 'No, I'm afraid, I don't.'

'That's amber. Sometimes little pieces of amber are washed up on the beach but only along certain parts of the coast and it's very difficult to find. It's fossilised resin from trees, you know, millions of years old and quite valuable, I believe. It starts off in the Baltic and is washed across the ocean and ends up on the East Coast. That's used for jewellery too,' the nun burbled on. 'Sometimes you find little insects fossilised inside. Mrs McPhee – she's my deputy by the way – met a delightful man on the beach, used to be the curator at the museum at

York, I believe, who lived just along the coast at Runswick Bay, and he showed her –'

'Sister,' I began.

'Yes, Mr Phinn?' She looked directly at me, smiling.

'About the display.'

'Yes?' She stared up with a wide and innocent expression.

'Well, Sister, there is –' I opened my mouth to continue but lost courage. 'Oh, nothing.'

Someone was going to have to tell her, I thought, but it certainly wasn't going to be me.

'Last week,' she babbled on, 'the older children wrote some delightful little poems and descriptions, which I've mounted on the wall around the display. Don't you think it looks wonderful?'

'Yes, indeed, wonderful,' I murmured, my eyes still riveted on the offending object in the cabinet.

'I want the school to look really nice for when the bishop visits on Monday.'

'The bishop's coming on Monday?' I asked in a doom-laden voice.

'Yes, he's coming to talk to the children about their First Holy Communion. Last year he brought his crosier to show them. One child wrote to him afterwards: "Thank you for coming to see us, Bishop Michael. I now know just what a real crook looks like." We did laugh, Mrs McPhee and me.'

Just then a small boy approached the headmistress and tugged on her cloak. At last the nun stopped her babbling, and bent down to hear what the child wanted to tell her. I grabbed at my chance to get help.

'Sister,' I said quickly, 'I've forgotten to sign in. I'll go and do it now.'

'Oh, don't worry about that now, Mr Phinn,' said the nun. 'You can do it at morning break.'

'No, no, I had better do it now,' I insisted. 'I'll just pop into the office.'

Without waiting for a reply, I shot across the hall and into the

school office, making the school secretary jump with surprise.

'Quick!' I hissed. 'Can you come with me?'

'Pardon?' she replied.

'Can you come with me now, it's urgent!'

'I'm in the middle of checking the dinner money,' she told me. 'It's extremely inconvenient.'

'It really is *very* important,' I told her.

'But I'm half way through –'

'Please,' I begged.

'Oh very well,' she said, shaking her head, 'but I don't know what can be so urgent.'

'You'll see in a minute,' I said, and popped my head out of the office to see where Sister Marie-Thérèse was. Fortunately the headmistress had moved down the corridor with the small boy who was showing her a picture on the wall.

'Look,' I whispered, pointing to the manifestation in the display cabinet.

There was a sharp intake of breath. 'Oh dear,' groaned the school secretary, raising her hand to her neck and wincing visibly.

'Do you see what I mean?'

'I do,' she mumbled. 'However did *that* get in there?'

'I suppose Sister must have put it in, without realising what it is. Perhaps you ought to tell her.'

'Tell her?' she hissed.

'What it is.'

'Me?' she exclaimed. 'Why me? You're the English inspector, you're the one who's supposed to be good with words.'

'No, no, I couldn't possibly do it. It would be much better coming from you.'

'Mr Phinn,' she said, looking me straight in the eyes, 'I am prepared to do most things as a school secretary but explaining to a nun what a condom is, is not one of them.'

'Well, I certainly can't,' I said.

'And what are you two talking about?' came a cheerful voice from behind us.

The school secretary and I swung round together to find

Sister Marie-Thérèse, with that sweet innocent expression on her round face.

'We were just looking at your lovely display, Sister,' I replied feebly.

'I'm very pleased with it,' trilled the nun. 'I am sure Bishop Michael will get quite a surprise when he comes on Monday.'

'I bet he will,' I said *sotto voce*.

'It's very nice, Sister,' said the school secretary, giving a watery smile. There was a nervous red rash creeping up her neck. Then she turned to me and gave me a conspiratorial look. 'I'll see to it,' she whispered. 'Just keep her occupied.'

'Perhaps we should make a start, Sister,' I said pleasantly.

'Yes, yes, of course, Mr Phinn,' said the nun. 'The children are all very excited about meeting you.'

I followed the headmistress as she headed for the junior department with a veritable spring in her step. When I glanced back, I saw the school secretary still staring at the display cabinet like a hungry cat watching a tank full of goldfish.

At the end of the corridor was a large plaster statue of Our Lady of Lourdes. She had a pale, gentle face with downcast eyes, a golden halo, and her hands were pressed together in prayer. In the long blue veil and white cloak and with an innocent expression, the figure did not look dissimilar to Sister Marie-Thérèse. I was brought up short and gasped out loud. On a plinth, beneath the statue, was the instruction:

> As you pass Our Lady,
> Say an ejaculatory prayer.

'Whatever is an ejaculatory prayer, Sister?' I asked the nun, who had turned back to me when she heard my gasp.

'"Our Lady of Lourdes pray for us."'

'I'm sorry?'

'That's an ejaculatory prayer, Mr Phinn,' said the nun. 'Just a small appeal for Our Lady to watch over us and keep us safe.'

'I see,' I said, my mind whirling back to the object in the display cabinet.

The junior classroom was warm and welcoming. The

children, aged between nine and eleven, looked up eagerly as we entered.

'Good morning, children,' said the headmistress with jovial earnestness.

'Good morning, Sister Marie-Thérèse. Good morning, everybody,' chorused the children.

'Have they been good, Mrs McPhee?' the nun asked the teacher.

'Need you ask, Sister?' replied her colleague, scanning the sea of faces before her, with an expression which defied contradiction.

Mrs McPhee was a plump woman with a thick fuzz of white hair and the pale eyes of a piranha. She wore a tight-fitting, wheat-coloured turtleneck sweater, heavy brown tweed pleated skirt, thick woollen stockings the colour of mud and substantial brogues. Around her neck hung a single rope of large blue beads. I could tell she was the 'I-stand-no-nonsense' sort of teacher.

'This is my indispensable deputy headteacher, Mr Phinn,' said the nun, giving her colleague the fullest and most charming of smiles. 'She's worth her weight in gold.'

'Oh, Sister, really!' said Mrs McPhee, laughing in an enthusiastic, horsy sort of way.

'Now, children,' said the headmistress, 'I told you that we would be having a very special visitor this morning and here he is. Mr Phinn is a school inspector, here to look at all the lovely work you have been doing.' The nun turned in my direction, rested a small hand on my arm and said, in a lower voice, 'This group, Mr Phinn, is one of the junior classes. There's quite a range of age and ability, as you will see. The children have been busy composing prayers and when Bishop Michael comes on Monday, we shall have a very special assembly when some of them will read out their efforts.'

'That sounds splendid,' I said, wondering what sort of mood the bishop would be in if he had seen what I had seen in the display in the entrance hall.

'Now, Mr Phinn,' continued Sister, 'would you like to have a little look around the classroom, perhaps listen to some of the children read and examine the work they have been doing and then –'

'There's not much written work in their books,' interrupted Mrs McPhee in one of those deep, loud voices possessed by market traders. 'But you will not be expecting to see a lot, will you, Mr Phinn, this being the start of term?' She gave me a look which said: 'Disagree with me, if you dare!'

'No,' I assured her. 'I shall not be expecting to see a lot.'

'Well, that's just as well,' said Mrs McPhee, her face relaxing, 'because they haven't done much yet – just the prayers they are working on.'

'I'll leave you to it then,' simpered Sister. 'I have paperwork to attend to.'

As she headed for the door, the headmistress stopped in her tracks and peered out of the window. I followed her gaze to see the school secretary creeping past in the direction of the dustbins. She was wearing bright yellow rubber gloves and a pained expression and she was carrying something, at arm's length, on a shovel.

'Whatever is Mrs Sanders up to?' said Sister to Mrs McPhee. 'Perhaps the school cat has . . .' and she mouthed 'mouse' to her colleague before leaving the room.

The first pupil I approached was very keen to tell me about the books he liked to read. He was a small boy with shiny blond hair, clear blue eyes and a face full of freckles. He told me his name was Alexander.

'I expect all your pals call you Alex,' I said to him.

'No they don't, actually,' he told me seriously. 'They call me Alexander. I don't like my name shortened.'

'No,' I said smiling, 'neither do I.' Connie, the caretaker at the Staff Development Centre, sometimes referred to me as 'Gerv'. It sounded like a brand of cheap petrol. 'And how are you today, Alexander?' I asked.

'Well, I'm not a hundred per cent,' he told me. 'But I don't like to miss school.'

'And what is your reading book about?'

'Dinosaurs. I'm really into dinosaurs,' the boy explained solemnly.

'Are you?'

'Oh yes. They're incredible creatures. I know quite a lot about dinosaurs. Do you know much about dinosaurs, Mr Phinn?'

'No, not a lot.'

'Do you know which was the longest?' asked the boy, looking me confidently in the eye.

'I'm not entirely sure,' I said and I wasn't. 'Is it the brontosaurus?'

'No. It's the diplodocus. As long as two double-decker buses, end to end. Do you know which was the biggest?'

'Was *that* the brontosaurus?'

'Wrong again. It was the brachiosaurus. It was taller than two giraffes and as heavy as eight full-grown elephants. Mind-blowing isn't it? They weighed about thirty tonnes. Do you know which was the smallest?'

'I've no idea,' I told him.

'Compsognathus. It was about the size of a chicken. You'll not know which was the fastest, then?'

'No, I'm afraid not.'

'Gallimimus,' said the boy. 'It was a bit like an ostrich and could run over thirty miles an hour.'

'Really. I do know which was the fiercest, though,' I said.

'Which one?' The boy looked up at me intently with the clear blue eyes.

'The tyrannosaurus rex.'

The boy smiled and shook his head. 'Wrong again, I'm afraid. It was the deinonychus. It had huge slashing claws on each back foot and a set of killer teeth.' He made a gnashing movement, then clacked his teeth together to emphasise his point. 'They hunted in packs. Its name means "terrible claw". A lot of people think the tyrannosaurus rex was the fiercest,' he said leaning back in his chair, 'but they're wrong.'

'Which was the last dinosaur to live on Earth?' I asked him.

I was genuinely interested. Very often the questions I asked pupils were pseudo questions. I already knew the answers and was merely seeing if the children did. It was very refreshing to ask questions for which I did not know the answers.

'Now that's a tricky one, Mr Phinn.' He sucked in his breath and thought for a moment. 'Most people would say it was the triceratops, but we can't be sure. They lived about sixty-five million years ago, give or take a million. Shall I read you a bit from my book?'

'Yes, I think that's a very good idea,' I said.

So the boy read with great gusto from a thick tome. He stopped at intervals to tell me additional fascinating facts about the great creatures and to point out interesting features in the pictures.

'You're a very good reader as well as being so knowledgeable, Alexander,' I told him.

'Yes, I know,' he said in a matter-of-fact voice. 'And you're a very good listener.'

I smiled and shook my head. I have met many a precocious child in my time but Alexander took the biscuit. 'And when you leave school, I expect you want to work in the Natural History Museum in London, don't you, and be the world expert on dinosaurs?'

'Oh no, Mr Phinn, I want to be a solicitor, like my father. There's not much of a future in dinosaurs.'

The next child, although younger than Alexander, was a large girl with saucer eyes and thick black hair tied in great bunches. Her thumb was stuck in her mouth. I had intended asking her to read me a few sentences from her book but this turned out to be not much more than a picture book. Clearly she had some special needs and experienced difficulty with her reading. The page she was looking at depicted a large black horse galloping across a river. Beneath it was written: 'The horse is in the water.' When I asked her what it said, she looked at me for a moment, regarded me as if I were simple-minded, removed the thumb and informed me bluntly, 'It sez: "'T'nag's in t'beck!"'

While I was listening to another child read, I heard Mrs McPhee's threateningly low voice somewhere behind us.

'No, Alexander, I said a prayer.'

'But, miss, I want to write about my holidays,' appealed the child.

'Well, you are not going to,' said the teacher sharply. 'You are to write a prayer like everyone else and that is that.'

'But, Mrs McPhee,' persisted the child, 'I really don't want to write a prayer.'

'Alexander,' snapped the teacher, 'everyone is writing a prayer. We have looked at prayers, listened to prayers and read prayers. I have spent a full lesson telling you how to write a prayer. We are not writing about your holidays. When the bishop comes in on Monday and we are in assembly reading out our prayers starting "Thank you, God" – it would sound rather strange your reading about your holidays, "Last summer we went to Blackpool", wouldn't it?'

'Actually, we didn't go to Blackpool, miss,' the child told her. 'We went in a *gite* in France.'

'I'm not in the slightest bit interested where you went, Alexander,' interrupted the teacher sharply. 'Now get on with your prayer. Chop! Chop!'

'But, miss –' began the boy, in a wheedling tone of voice.

Mrs McPhee drew a deep exasperated breath. 'No buts, Alexander, off you go. "Thank you, God!"'

But the child wouldn't let it lie. 'You see, Mrs McPhee, I don't know whether I believe in God.'

'Not believe in God!' exclaimed the teacher, heaving her ample bosom, her pale eyes now ablaze.

'I think I believe in the "Big Bang" theory like my father,' said the child, quite undaunted by the teacher's dramatic display of outrage.

'Alexander Maxwell-Smith,' said Mrs McPhee, slowly and in a hushed and slightly sinister voice, 'if you do not start your prayer "Thank you, God" in the next few seconds, there *will* be a "Big Bang!"'

I turned round to look at Alexander. The boy, shoulders

drooping and with a weary expression on his small face, slouched in his chair, sighed and took up his pen. Mrs McPhee gave me an exasperated look and shook her head. 'Not believe in God, indeed,' she mouthed.

A little while later, having heard more children read and looked at some of the prayers, I arrived back at Alexander's desk. His prayer was written in large neat handwriting. 'Thank you, God,' it started. Good, I thought, he had decided to do as he was told. Then I read on: 'Thank you, God, for my holidays. This year we stayed in a gite in Vence (that's in the south of France) and had a most enjoyable time.' He had followed this with an account of his holiday which sounded anything but 'most enjoyable'. His mother, he wrote, had got sunburnt and looked like a cooked lobster, his father had been ill for three days with his head down the lav, his brother had fallen over and sprained his wrist and his little sister had got lost and they had all ended up at the police station. His eventful account concluded with: 'But in spite of all the problems, I had a good time and thank you God, for my holidays. Amen.'

I left before the 'Big Bang' which would surely occur when his teacher read Alexander's prayer, and headed for the infant department. I had a vision of the boy garrotted by the blue beads or suffocated in the heaving bosom of the formidable Mrs McPhee. Passing through the entrance hall, I stopped by the display and, much to my relief, saw it was bereft of the offending article.

In the next class, I discovered Miss Reece, a young woman with sandy-coloured hair tied back in a pony tail and wearing a bright yellow mohair jumper and pale cream slacks. She sat with the children clustered around her and was reading them a story from a large coloured picture book which was displayed on an easel beside her. One small girl sat on her knee. I crept to the back of the classroom, perched on a small melamine chair and listened.

'I can see the little lamb bleating in the meadow,' read the teacher slowly and dramatically. She pointed at the picture. 'Can you see the little lamb, children? Isn't he lovely and

woolly?' The children nodded vigorously. Miss Reece continued, 'I can see the little calf mooing for his mother.'

'He's black and white, miss,' volunteered the child sitting on the teacher's knee.

'He is, isn't he, Chloë.' The teacher read on. 'I can see the little foal frisking in the field. "Frisking" is an unusual word, isn't it, children?'

'It means kicking up its legs, Miss Reece,' called out a child sitting cross-legged in front of her.

'Well done, Martin. It does mean that.'

Another child raised a hand. 'Miss! Miss!' she cried.

'In a moment, Caitlin. We will be able to talk about the animals when I've finished reading the book.'

'He's sweet, isn't he, miss?' said the little girl sitting on the teacher's knee.

'He is very sweet, Chloë,' agreed the teacher, 'but just listen, dear, there's a good girl, otherwise we will never get to the end.' She turned the page. 'I can see the little piglet grunting in the grass.'

A small boy, with a shock of red hair and a runny nose, who was sitting directly in front of me, began snorting and grunting like a pig.

'We don't need the animal noises, John-Paul, thank you very much,' said the teacher with a slight edge to her voice. 'Just look at the pictures and listen to the words.' She turned the page.

'Miss! Miss!' cried little Caitlin again.

'What did I say, Caitlin?' asked the teacher. 'Just be patient, you can tell me in a minute.' She read on. 'I can see the little chicks chirping in the farmyard.' The small child sitting on the teacher's knee leaned forward and looked intently at the picture of the bright yellow chicks in the picture. 'They look as if they have just hatched out of their eggs, don't they, children?' said the teacher. 'All soft and fluffy and golden.'

Chloë looked at the picture and then at the teacher and then back at the picture. After a moment she began stroking the teacher's bright yellow mohair jumper.

'Do you know, miss,' she said in that loud, confident voice only possessed by young children, 'you look as if you've just been laid.'

Miss Reece turned crimson and I nearly fell off the chair, laughing.

'Miss! Miss!' Caitlin's voice now sounded desperate.

'What is it?' asked the teacher, attempting to gain her composure.

'Miss,' moaned the child, 'I've been sick in my jumper. I've been trying to tell you.'

I watched Miss Reece with great admiration as she produced a black bin-liner from her desk drawer, stripped the child of her jumper like a poacher skinning a rabbit and deposited the soiled article of clothing inside without so much as an iota of vomit touching anything or anybody. The teacher then expertly tied a tight knot in the bin liner and dropped it next to her desk. 'We'll let your mummy take that home after school, shall we, Caitlin?' she said pleasantly. Miss Reece then took the child's hand and asked me, 'Will you be all right on your own for a few minutes, Mr Phinn? I'm just going to take Caitlin to the school office. Sometimes one child being sick starts all the others off. There are plenty of bin liners in my top drawer, if you need them.'

Later that morning, while the children were busy writing short poems and descriptions about the animals, I listened to a series of very competent little readers who had a great deal to say for themselves. One little girl, with apple-red cheeks, was particularly chatty.

'Are you a good speller, Mr Phinn?' she asked.

'I am a very, very good speller,' I teased. 'I can spell any word.'

'Any word?' she gasped.

'Any word at all. I'm the world's best speller. Would you like to tell me a word and I will spell it for you?'

'Yes, but you're a grown-up,' she said, folding her small arms across her chest. 'Grown-ups can spell words.' She thought for a moment. 'Can you spell my name?'

'Of course, I can,' I replied, but knew that this might prove tricky. I have met children with a range of unusual, not to say bizarre names, as well as names which were not spelt as they sound. There was Kristofer, Curston, Mykell, Charleen, Kaylee, Heyleigh, Kylee, Barby, Blasé (pronounced Blaze), Gooey (spelt Guy) and a child called Portia but spelt Porsche for, as the teacher explained to me with a wry smile, the girl's father had always wanted a Porsche car. In one school there were two sets of twins from the same family, aged ten and eleven respectively, named after great tragic heroines: Cleopatra and Cassandra, Desdemona and Dido. Then there were the brother and sister, Sam and Ella which, when said at speed, sounded like food poisoning.

'My name is Roisin,' said the little girl bringing me back to the present. 'It's Irish. It means "little rose".'

How very apt, I thought, looking at the rosy cheeks. I spelled it correctly and pulled a smug expression.

'And my brother's name's Niall.'

I got that one right, as well.

'My sisters are called Siobhaun and Nuala.'

I was doing really well now and obviously impressing my little interrogator who wasn't to know about my Irish background.

'And there's my brother, Rory and remember, Mr Phinn, he has eight letters in his name. And my cousin, Orlah, who has nine in hers.'

I buried my head in my hands in mock helplessness and heard the child giggle uncontrollably. Then Roisin spelt the names for me, speaking the letters loudly and slowly as if I was hard of hearing.

'R-u-a-r-a-i-d-h and O-r-f-h-l-a-i-t-h,' she told me. 'Easy-peasy!'

I stood with Sister Marie-Thérèse in the entrance hall at the end of the morning.

'Well thank you, Sister,' I said. 'I shall send in my report in a few days' time, but everything appears to be fine. The children

read extremely well, the writing is above average, the atmosphere in the school is positive and the teaching very good.' I looked in the direction of the display cabinet. 'And the display . . . is wonderful.'

'"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who bringeth good tidings,"' said the nun.

My attention, however, had been caught by the school secretary standing in the doorway of the office. She gave me a vigorous thumbs-up sign.

'I'm sorry, what did you say, Sister?'

'Isaiah, Mr Phinn.'

'Who?'

'From the Bible. Isaiah,' said the nun. '"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who bringeth good tidings."'

'Yes, of course, Sister.'

'Now, that's most odd,' said the headmistress, resting a small hand on my arm. 'I think I am either going mad or we have a ghost.'

'A ghost?' I repeated.

'Well, I'm sure I put a little coloured balloon which one of the children found on the beach in Whitby in my display and it's just disappeared into thin air.'

'A balloon?' I sounded like an echo.

'Don't you recall seeing a pink balloon in my display this morning?' asked the nun with a puzzled expression.

'No, Sister,' I said firmly, 'there was no balloon in your display. I would have remembered. No, no, there was definitely no balloon.'