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Mister Teacher

Jack Sheffield

Chapter One

Nits and the New Starters

86 children were registered on roll on the first day of the school year. The school nurse completed a head-lice inspection. Skateboards were banned following a directive from County Hall.

Extract from the Ragley School Logbook:
 Tuesday, 5 September 1978

'Ah don't want this school giving my Damian no nits, Mr Sheffield!'

Mrs Brown was our least favourite parent and had the build and manner of a raging buffalo. It didn't seem to be the right moment to correct her use of a double negative.

'What seems to be the problem, Mrs Brown?' I removed my Buddy Holly spectacles and polished the lenses in an attempt to look composed.

'Ah'll tell y'what t'problem is,' she shouted. 'It's nits!'

She advanced through the office doorway, dragging four-year-old Damian with her. Clutching a Curlywurly bar, he was cheerfully oblivious of the chocolate and sticky toffee smeared across his face.

'Them little buggers are everywhere. My Eddie says a midget bit 'im last night in t'back seat of 'is car. So ah want summat done!'

I took a deep breath and tried to remain calm. 'We've heard about the outbreak of head lice in the village, Mrs Brown, and the school nurse will be in this afternoon to do a check on all the children.'

'Well, she better do it reight!' yelled Mrs Brown. She yanked little Damian's arm, causing his Curlywurly bar to leave a chocolate skid mark on my office wall, and rumbled out into the entrance hall. As I closed the door I heard her final tirade: 'We never 'ad no nits when Mr Pruett was 'eadmaster.'

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I glanced up at the clock on the office wall. It was exactly 8.45 a.m. on Tuesday, 5 September 1978, and my second year as headmaster of Ragley Church of England Primary School in North Yorkshire had begun.

Back in the sanctuary of the staff-room, Ragley's other three teachers were collecting their new class registers from Vera, the secretary.

'Were those Mrs Brown's dulcet tones, Jack?' asked Anne Grainger.

Anne, a slim, attractive brunette in her mid-forties, was a superb deputy headmistress. She taught the youngest children in school in Class 1 and Damian Brown was one of six four-year-olds about to start full-time education in her class.

'Yes, and she's just about blamed me for the arrival of head lice in the village.' I picked up my old herringbone sports jacket from the back of a chair, frowned at the worn state of the leather patches on the sleeves, and straightened my brand-new tie.

Sally Pringle passed me a mug of coffee. 'Nice tie, Jack,' she said, nodding towards my fashionable flower-power tie sporting a bright pattern of yellow daisies.

Sally, the lower junior class teacher, was a tall, curlyhaired thirty-something who clung to the last vestiges of her rebellious hippie days. She took her hands out of the pockets of her purple tie-dyed apron, which clashed violently with her frilly lime-green blouse and buttercupyellow waistcoat, and grinned at Vera.

'What do you think, Vera?' asked Sally.

Vera Evans, a spinster in her mid-fifties, had been the school secretary for over twenty years and her opinion was always important.

'I'm sure the children will think it's cheerful, Mr Sheffield,' said Vera tactfully.

Vera pressed the creases from the skirt of her immaculate Marks & Spencer's two-piece navy suit, and distributed the new registers.

'Thanks, Vera,' said Jo Maddison, staring a little nervously at her smart new register. 'I promise there will be no mistakes this year.'

Jo, a diminutive twenty-three-year-old, was about to begin her second year as teacher of the top infant class. She flicked her long black hair from her eyes and scrutinized my new fashion statement.

'I think it's an excellent choice, Jack,' said Jo, with an encouraging smile. 'Where did you get it?'

'Beth bought it for me,' I said.

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You could have heard a pin drop.

'And how are things with you and Beth?' asked Sally.

Anne and Vera gave Sally a startled look, while Jo immediately found the small print on the front cover of her new register particularly interesting.

'Not sure, but thanks for asking,' I replied cautiously.

They all nodded in unison, in the way women nod when they know more than they say they do.

Beth Henderson had visited Ragley School almost a year ago. She was the deputy headmistress of Thirkby Junior School and had been assisting Miss Barrington- Huntley, Chair of the Education Committee, on her first inspection of the school. Beth and I were both single and in our early thirties. For me, it had been an eventful meeting, not least because it felt like love at first sight. A few weeks ago, in the school summer holidays, Beth and I had enjoyed a carefree holiday together but now she was applying for headships in Hampshire, so I guessed the feelings I had were not reciprocated. With a sigh, I put on my jacket, drank the coffee, picked up my new register, and headed for the door.

'I'll leave you ladies to it,' I said. 'I'll check on the children in the yard and then I'll ring the bell.'

The front door of the school creaked on its Victorian hinges as I walked under the archway of Yorkshire stone. Above my head, the date 1878 was carved into the rugged lintel and the grey slate roof reflected the bright September sunshine. My flared polyester trousers flapped in the breeze as I walked across the small playground that was alive with skipping feet and the shouts of over eighty red-faced four- to eleven-year-olds.

The mothers of the new starters were gathering in a corner of the playground. Betty Buttle, a local farmer's wife, hung on to her sturdy, rosy-cheeked twin daughters, Rowena and Katrina, and absent-mindedly picked straw out of their hair. Ominously, both girls were scratching their heads. Sue Phillips, our local nurse, looked relaxed as she watched her four-year-old Dawn wander off to chat with her friends. Sue's elder daughter, Claire, had been in my class last year and she had seen all this before. Alongside her, Margery Ackroyd, the local gossip, shouted to her son, Tony, to look after his little sisters, Charlotte and Theresa, and then proceeded to tell Sue Phillips about a certain local plumber who had offered to do more than lag her cold-water pipes.

Meanwhile, Mrs Dudley-Palmer, by far the richest woman in the village, slammed the door of her Oxford Blue 1975 Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow and hurried up the drive with six-year-old Elisabeth Amelia and four-yearold Victoria Alice. When she reached the playground, she dabbed her eyes with a lace handkerchief and clutched Victoria Alice, as if she was about to lose her

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for ever. Such sentiment was lost on Mrs Brown, who pointed little Damian towards the school entrance, gave him a push, and then turned on her heel and waddled towards the school gate. She gave me one final withering look before lighting up a cigarette and heading for the bus stop.

I walked under the magnificent avenue of horse chestnut trees that bordered the front of the schoolyard and looked around me. Instantly, I remembered why I loved working in this beautiful part of the north of England. Ragley was a pretty picture-postcard Yorkshire village. On the far side of the village green, a group of farmers sat on the benches outside the white-fronted public house, The Royal Oak. The High Street was flanked by wide grass verges and terraced cottages with reddish-brown pantile roofs. Villagers were going about their daily lives, shopping, chatting, cleaning windows and watering hanging baskets.

It was an age of innocence. There was no National Curriculum, computers in schools were a far-off dream, and a teacher's salary was £400 a month. For this was the autumn of 1978. Average house prices had shot up to £17,000, one-third of the population of York, some 30,000 people, had paid to see Star Wars and Close Encounters of the Third Kind, and John Travolta and Olivia Newton- John were riding high in the charts with 'You're The One That I Want'. Suits had wide lapels, trousers were flared, and men often had longer hair than women. Also, the skateboard had arrived.

In fact, it was about to make its first appearance at Ragley School. Dominic Brown, elder brother of Damian, was racing towards school on a skateboard at that very moment.

'Gerrin t'school, Dominic,' screamed Mrs Brown. 'Y'neither use nor ornament!'

He ducked as his mother tried to clip him round the ear and promptly fell off. With his skateboard tucked under his arm, he ran through the gate and into the safety of the playground.

I glanced at my watch. It was almost nine o'clock. Down the High Street, the owners of the Post Office, Diane's Hair Salon, Nora's Coffee Shop, Pratt's Hardware Emporium, the Village Pharmacy and Piercy's Butcher's Shop were also beginning to look at their watches and unlock their doors. Prudence Golightly's General Stores had been open for over an hour and she had just switched on her Bush radio in time for the pips preceding the nine o'clock news. I walked across to the school belltower, grabbed the thick, ancient rope, and rang the school bell that had summoned children to their lessons for the last one hundred years.

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