

Gentlemen & Players

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P A W N



IF THERE'S ONE THING I'VE LEARNED IN THE PAST FIFTEEN years, it's this; that murder is really no big deal. It's just a boundary, meaningless and arbitrary as all others – a line drawn in the dirt. Like the giant NO TRESPASSERS sign on the drive to St Oswald's, straddling the air like a sentinel. I was nine years old at the time of our first encounter, and it loomed over me then with the growling menace of a school bully.

NO TRESPASSERS
NO UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY BEYOND THIS POINT
BY ORDER.

Another child might have been daunted by the command. But in my case curiosity overrode the instinct. By *whose* order? Why *this* point and not another? And most importantly, what would happen if I crossed that line?

Of course I already knew the school was out of bounds. By then I'd been living in its shadow for six months, and already that tenet stood tall among the commandments of my young life, as laid down by John Snyder. *Don't be a sissy. Look after your own. Work hard, play hard. A little drink never did anyone any harm.* And, most importantly: *Stay clear of St Oswald's*, occasionally punctuated by a *Stay bloody clear if you know what's good for you*, or a warning punch to the upper arm. The punches were supposed to be friendly, I knew. All the same, they hurt. Parenting was not one of John Snyder's special skills.

Nevertheless, for the first few months I obeyed without question. Dad was so proud of his new job as Porter; such a fine old school, such a great reputation, and we were going to live in the Old Gatehouse, where generations of Porters before us had lived. There would be tea on the lawn on summer evenings, and it would be the beginning of something wonderful. Perhaps, when she saw how well we were doing now, Mum might even come home.

But weeks passed and none of that happened. The Gatehouse was a Grade 2 listed building, with tiny, latticed windows that let in hardly any light. There was a perpetual smell of damp, and we weren't allowed a satellite dish because it would have lowered the tone. Most of the furniture belonged to St Oswald's – heavy oak chairs and dusty dressers – and next to them our own things – salvaged from the old council flat on Abbey Road – looked cheap and out of place. My dad's time was entirely taken up with his new job and I quickly learned to be self-reliant – to

make any demand, such as regular meals or clean sheets, qualified as *being a sissy* – not to trouble my father at weekends, and always to lock my bedroom door on Saturday nights.

Mum never wrote; any mention of her also counted as *being a sissy*, and after a while I started to forget what she had looked like. My dad had a bottle of her perfume hidden under his mattress, though, and when he was out on his rounds, or down the Engineers' with his mates, I would sometimes sneak into his bedroom and spray a little of that perfume – it was called Cinnabar – on to my pillow and maybe pretend that Mum was watching TV in the next room, or that she'd just popped into the kitchen to get me a cup of milk and that she'd be back to read me a story. A bit stupid, really: she'd never done those things when she was home. Anyway, after a bit, Dad must have thrown the bottle away, because one day it was gone, and I couldn't even remember how she'd smelled any more.

Christmas approached, bringing bad weather and even more work for the Porter to deal with, so we never did get to have tea on the lawn. On the other hand, I was happy enough. A solitary child even then; awkward in company; invisible at school. During the first term I kept to myself; stayed out of the house; played in the snowy woods behind St Oswald's and explored every inch of the school's perimeter – making sure never to cross the forbidden line.

I discovered that most of St Oswald's was screened from public view; the main building by a long avenue of linden trees – now bare – which bordered the drive, and the land

surrounded on all sides by walls and hedges. But through the gates I could see those lawns – mowed to banded perfection by my father – the cricket grounds with their neat hedges; the chapel with its weathervane and its inscriptions in Latin. Beyond that lay a world as strange and remote in my eyes as Narnia or Oz; a world to which I could never belong.

My own school was called Abbey Road Juniors; a squat little building on the council estate, with a bumpy playground built on a slant and two entrance gates with BOYS and GIRLS written above them in sooty stone. I'd never liked it; but even so I dreaded my arrival at Sunnybank Park, the sprawling comprehensive which I was destined by postcode to attend.

Since my first day at Abbey Road I'd watched the Sunnybankers – cheap green sweatshirts with the school logo on the breast, nylon rucksacks, fag-ends, hairspray – with growing dismay. They would hate me, I knew it. They would take one look at me and they would hate me. I sensed it immediately. I was skinny; undersized; a natural hander-in of homework. Sunnybank Park would swallow me whole.

I pestered my father. 'Why? Why the Park? Why there?'

'Don't be a sissy. There's nothing wrong with the Park, kid. It's just a school. They're all the bloody same.'

Well, *that* was a lie. Even I knew that. It made me curious; it made me resentful. And now, as spring began to quicken over the bare land and white buds burst from the blackthorn hedges, I looked once more at that NO TRESPASSERS sign, painstakingly lettered in my father's

hand, and asked myself: Whose ORDER? Why *this* point and not another? And, with an increasing sense of urgency and impatience: What would happen if I crossed that line?

There was no wall here, no visible boundary of any kind. None was needed. There was simply the road, the blackthorn hedge running alongside it and, a few yards to the left, the sign. It stood there arrogantly, unchallenged, certain of its authority. Beyond it on the other side I imagined perilous, uncharted territory. Anything could be waiting there – land-mines, mantraps, security guards, hidden cameras.

Oh, it *looked* safe enough: no different, in fact, from the near side. But that sign told me otherwise. Beyond it, there was Order. There was authority. Any infringement of that order would result in retribution as mysterious as it was terrible. I did not doubt it for a moment; the fact that no details were given merely strengthened the air of menace.

So I sat at a respectful distance and observed the restricted area. It was strangely comforting to know that here, at least, Order was being enforced. I'd seen the police cars outside Sunnybank Park. I'd seen the graffiti on the sides of the buildings and the boys throwing stones at cars in the lane. I'd heard them yelling at the teachers as they came out of school, and I'd seen the generous sheaves of razor-wire above the staff car-park.

Once I had watched as a group of four or five cornered a boy on his own. He was a few years older than I was, and

dressed with greater care than the majority of Sunnybankers. I knew he was in for a beating as soon as I saw the library books under his arm. Readers are always fair game at a place like Sunnybank.

St Oswald's was another world. Here I knew there would be no graffiti, no litter, no vandalism – not so much as a broken window. The sign said so; and I felt a sudden inarticulate conviction that *this* was where I truly belonged; this place where young trees could be planted without somebody snapping their heads off in the night, where no one was left bleeding in the road; where there were no surprise visits from the community police officer, or posters warning pupils to leave their knives at home. Here would be stern masters in old-fashioned black gowns; surly Porters like my father; tall prefects. Here to do one's homework was not to be a *poof*, or a *swot*, or a *queer*. Here was safety. Here was home.

I was alone; no one else had ventured this far. Birds came and went on the forbidden ground. Nothing happened to them. Some time later a cat swaggered out from under the hedge and sat facing me, licking its paw. Still nothing.

I came closer then, daring first to breach the shadow, then to crouch between the sign's great feet. My own shadow crept stealthily forward. My shadow trespassed.

For a time that was thrilling enough. But not for long: there was already too much of the rebel in me to be content with a technical misdemeanour. With my foot I jabbed lightly at the grass on the other side, then pulled away with a delicious shiver, like a child taking its first step into the

ocean. Of course I had never seen the ocean, but the instinct was there, and the sensation of having moved into an alien element where anything might happen.

Nothing did.

I took another step and this time, did not pull away. Still nothing. The sign towered over me like a monster from a late-night movie, but it was strangely frozen, as if outraged at my impudence. Seeing my chance, I made a break for it and ran across the windy field towards the hedge, running low, tensed for an attack. Reaching the hedge, I flung myself into its shadow, breathless with fear. Now I had done it. Now they would come.

There was a gap in the hedge only a few feet away from me. It looked to be my best chance. I inched towards it, keeping to the shadow, and crammed myself into the tiny space. They might come at me from either side, I thought; if they came from both, then I would have to run for it. I had observed that given time, adults had a tendency to forget things, and I felt reasonably confident that if I could get away quickly enough, then I might possibly escape retribution.

Expectantly, I waited. The tightness in my throat gradually subsided. My heart slowed to a near-normal pace. I became aware of my surroundings, first with curiosity, then with increasing discomfort. There were thorns sticking through my T-shirt into my back. I could smell sweat, and soil, and the sour smell of the hedge. From somewhere close by came birdsong, a distant mower, a drowsy burr like insects in the grass. Nothing more. At first I grinned with

pleasure – I had trespassed, and escaped capture – then I became aware of a feeling of dissatisfaction, a flutter of resentment beneath my ribs.

Where were the cameras? The land-mines? The guards? Where was the ORDER, so sure of itself that it had to be written in capital letters? Most importantly, *where was my father?*

I stood up, still wary, and left the shadow of the hedge. The sun hit me in the face and I threw up a hand to shield my eyes. I took a step away into the open, then another.

Surely *now* they would come, these enforcers: these shadowy figures of order and authority. But seconds passed, and then minutes, and nothing happened. No one came, not a prefect, a teacher – not even a Porter.

A kind of panic clutched at me then, and I ran into the middle of the field and waved my arms, like someone on a desert island trying to flag down a rescue plane. Didn't they care? I was a trespasser. Didn't they see me?

'Here!' I was delirious with indignation. 'Here I am! Here! Here!'

Nothing. Not a sound. Not even the barking of a dog in the distance or the faintest whoop of a warning siren. It was then that I realized, with anger and a clammy kind of excitement, that it had all been a big lie. There was nothing in the field but grass and trees. Just a line in the dirt, daring me to cross it. And I had dared. I had defied the ORDER.

All the same I felt somehow cheated, as I often did when faced with the threats and assurances of the adult world, which promises so much and delivers so little.

They lie, kid. It was my father's voice – only slightly slurred – in my head. They promise you the world, kid, but they're all the same. They lie.

'They do not! Not always—'

Then try it. Go on. I dare you. See how far you get.

And so I went further, following the hedge up a small hill towards a stand of trees. There was another sign there: **TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED**. Of course by then the first step had been taken, and the implicit threat barely slowed me down.

But beyond the trees was a surprise. I'd expected to see a road, a railway line perhaps, a river – something to show that there was a world outside of St Oswald's. But from where I was standing, and as far as I could see, *everything* was St Oswald's: the hill, the little wood, the tennis courts, the cricket green, the sweet-smelling lawns and the long, long stretches of meadow beyond.

And here behind the trees I could see people; I could see boys. Boys of all ages; some barely older than myself, others dangerously, swaggeringly adult. Some were dressed in cricket whites, some wore running shorts and coloured singlets with numbers written on them. In a square of sand some distance away, some were practising jumps. And beyond them I could see a big building of soot-mellowed stone; rows of arched windows reflecting the sun; a long slate roof punctuated by skylights; a tower; a weathervane; a sprawl of outbuildings; a chapel; a graceful stairway leading down towards a lawn, trees, flowerbeds, asphalt courtyards separated from each other by railings and archways.

Here too were boys. Some sat on the steps. Some stood talking under the trees. Some were in navy-blue blazers and grey trousers, others in sports kit. The sound they made – a sound I had not even registered until now – reached me like a flock of exotic birds.

I understood at once that they were a different race to myself; gilded not only by the sunlight and their proximity to that lovely building but by something less tangible; a slick air of assurance; a mysterious shine.

Later, of course, I saw it as it really was. The genteel decay behind the graceful lines. The rot. But that first forbidden glimpse of St Oswald's seemed like unattainable glory to me then; it was Xanadu, it was Asgard and Babylon all in one. Within its grounds young gods lounged and cavorted.

I understood then that this was far more than a line in the dirt, after all. It was a barrier no amount of bravado or desire would permit me to cross. I was an intruder; suddenly I felt very conscious of my dirty jeans, my scuffed sneakers, my pinched face and lank hair. I no longer felt like a daring explorer. I had no right to be there. I had become something *low*; common; a spy, a prowler, a dirty little sneak with hungry eyes and light fingers. Invisible or not, that was how they would always see me. That was what I was. A Sunnybanker.

You see, it had already begun. *That* was St Oswald's; that's what it does to people. Rage flared in me like an ulcer. Rage, and the beginnings of revolt.

So I was an outsider. So what? Any rule can be broken.

Trespass, like any crime, goes unpunished when there's no one to see it. Words – however talismanic – are only ever words.

I didn't know it then, but that was the moment I declared war against St Oswald's. It wouldn't have me? Then I would have it. I would take it, and no one, nothing – not even my father – would stop me. The line had been drawn. Another boundary to be crossed, a more sophisticated bluff this time, secure in its ancient arrogance, unaware that therein lay the germ of its destruction. Another line, daring me to cross it.

Like murder.

