

THE IMPERFECT

It is the way of organizations to close ranks when under threat. Their errors and insufficiencies, which should make them experience pangs of shame, are denied, explained away and covered up, such that amorality, like cold stone in a fossil, replaces the essence of a dead conscience. The wonder is that their protagonists, when confronted with evidence of neglect, callous apathy and incompetence can maintain a determination to deceive and distract; the wonder is they can sleep. Perhaps the morally moribund sent out - when the game is finally up - to spout apologies to the media, using that disgusting phrase "lessons to be learnt" - (were key officials really so ignorant? Why?) - perhaps those piping mouth-pieces do convince shallow minds that the guilt is thereby expunged.

There is something tribal and primitive in the nature of organizations which engenders and reinforces these attitudes. When individuals are in a group - football supporters, demos and gangs are good examples - conscience and responsibility are diluted, making antisocial behaviour more probable. A youth on his own is less likely to yell abuse than he is from the middle of a loutish rabble. It is this dissolution of responsibility, I contend, which promotes unconscionable and cowardly behaviour in organizations.

The individual feared most - because he retains a conscience - is the whistleblower. The term is peculiar and puts us straight in mind of referees and games. What insights does the term reveal? Referees know the rules and make it clear they have been broken when they blow the whistle. But employees' contracts contain anti-whistle blowing clauses. So, if their concerns are shunted by a superior into the dark sidings, they may have no choice - if obeying the higher rules of conscience - but to break the contract.

The anti-whistle-blowing clause is designed to engender and nurture a germ of amorality, for most employees will choose self-preservation over a duty to others, especially if the Incompetent they ought to report is a powerful member of the system; for how can they be sure that they will not ultimately be made to suffer for their act of bravery and decency? Should there not be in every organization an ombudsman, an independent officer, to whom concerns can be taken? Or would that person inevitably be corrupted in its grip?

In this kind of world an Orwellian nightmare comes true. The very ideals on which institutions were founded are capsized. Instead of hospitals making people better, they kill them; instead of police forces bringing culprits to justice, they protect them (the killers of Stephen Lawrence); instead of homes for the elderly making their residents comfortable in their last years, they abuse them and let them thirst and starve; children under municipal protection suffer abuse and death. And so on.....

One of the most extraordinary examples of this behaviour - what his protagonist calls a psychosis - is the Dreyfus affair, so admirably fictionalized by Robert Harris in his novel *An Officer And A Spy*. A Jewish army officer, Alfred Dreyfus, and later an investigator Picquart - who by chance discovers Dreyfus is innocent of spying for the Germans - are pitilessly persecuted by the French army establishment because it becomes more important to save face than to correct an injustice, to the absurd extent that the man they *know to be guilty* - Esterhaze - the real spy in the first place - is exonerated! The book is a book for all time, warning, as Kafka did in *The Trial*, of the

bizarre and terrifying measures which a powerful, amoral organization is capable of inflicting on individuals.

After I had read *An Officer And A Spy*, I felt very angry. The narrator Picquart argues that if original mistakes are never rectified, then the stronger the urge becomes to keep covering up those and subsequent ones, since the consequences of a later exposure become more and more terrifying. It is that very fear - and this is why he uses the word psychosis - which persuades the powerful to bury the truth deeper and deeper.

In the final chapters, I could not help thinking of my friend Patrick. His is also a story of a man contending with hostile, cynical people in a flawed organization - a man who felt it was only right to act as he did, to his own ultimate detriment. It is a scenario on a much smaller and more modest canvas than Harris's grand one - drawn of an epoch in France where authoritarianism prevailed - but it represents what still happens routinely today in a modern country proclaiming justice, freedom and democracy - where the dark sharks lurk, small and large, still in control.

Pat has graciously allowed me to tell his tale in the first person with key alterations. He does not wish the location to be revealed but some might guess it from the description.

A GOOD LESSON

Put an inadequate man in a uniform and only one thing will be enhanced - his good opinion of himself. It was a surprise to discover this as a teenager one night outside a chippie after a tedious night at the cinema. One moment I was scoffing chips, the next lying on the pavement after been pushed over by a lunatic who had come hurtling out of the alleyway of the pub next door, screaming about somebody *pissing on his patch*. My precious chips lay scattered but I was more shocked than angry - at least I was until my assailant, a broad man in his twenties, pulled me up by my teeshirt and drew back his fist to inflict more punishment. He had been drinking and his reactions were slow, allowing me to sock him on his nose with my right and thump the side of his head with my left. Down he went. A car screeched to a halt. POLICE.

I tried to explain that I had been attacked and was only defending myself but one of the officers back at the police station was having none of it.

"I saw you hit him, Sunshine. His face is a terrible mess. There's blood on your shoe. Must have kicked him as well when he was down."

My friend had tried to explain to the officers that my assailant had picked on the wrong person but he had been pushed away as we roared off with me hand-cuffed in the back of the car.

"I *know* Barry - he's always having gits like you pissing in his alley. So he goes out to complain - and you set on him!"

I realised my age was working against me, my long hair, my CND sew-patch, my jean jacket, my flairs, my tie-dye teeshirt, all of which he had been eyeing with loathing, this red-faced officer, squeezed - just - into a navy uniform, so squeezed that there were white shirty spaces visible between the tunic buttons, while a slim, much younger bobby looked on, less than at his ease, maybe a raw recruit who needed to be impressed and inducted into these fine arts of detective work. Now my shoes, my floppy soft suede shoes were being studied and I could not suppress a giggle.

"Whassofunny? Proud of yourself?"

Now I found where my voice had been hiding.

“You know perfectly well I couldn’t hurt a fly - with these!”

I wagged my right foot and the sole at the toe, long come unstuck, flapped about like a drunken mouth. The young bobby blushed, smirked and nearly laughed, but corrected himself when I was smacked hard across the face.

“I’ll report you!”

“Can if you like. You were in a fight. Who’ll believe you?”

“He saw you do it!”

“Did you, PC Smart?”

He looked at the floor and shook his embarrassed head.

“See? You don’t get it, do you Sonny Jim? I wear a uniform. If - no *when* - it comes before the Bench, who will their Honours believe? Me in uniform - or a layabout like you?”

The question, whispered with menace, hung in the air like a bad fart mingling with the stale smell of the interview room. No answer was required.

After a few nervy weeks, a stiff, cream envelope with a crown printed on the back dropped on the mat. With fumbling fingers, and sure it would be a summons, I tore it open and scanned the letter rapidly. I discovered that the victim - (the victim!) - did not wish to press charges, and that, despite overwhelming evidence, no further action would be taken against me. Whoever had composed its chill, stern prose was sure, no doubt, that I had been taught a lesson; very true, but not the one he imagined. Any idea of joining the police when I graduated - my father had gone on about it - was irrevocably extinguished. The stink of the station and of corruption had been overpowering.

My grandfather who never did see eye to eye with my dad over politics - or much else - had said once or twice in a half-tipsy, half-dozy drone, *a policeman’s word is nine tenths of the law*. I had only laughed when he said it. Granddad hated the police. I realised that his calculations had been a little on the conservative side.

When we read Kafka’s *Trial* in the autumn term, my ordeal reminded me of Joseph K’s experience, arrested for a crime he had not only not committed, but which the authorities even refused to reveal to him by name.

I drifted into teaching in the eighties. Whenever I catch myself thinking back on that decade, I have to blink and concentrate on something else, like people do when they have had an appalling dream or have an event haunting their lives on which they cannot close a door. The stern, compassionless faces of the major players, the adoring faces of ordinary people swept away by reignited nationalism, the scorn of the TrueBlue Believers for their political opponents, the uncritical admiration of the *Mail*, the *Sun* and *Express*, the euphoria over slaughtering a few hundred soldiers and sailors of a tenth rate power over an island no-one had heard of and where Britain had no business to be anyway, the ruthless cowering of the miners, the cow-eyed adulation of our principal player for an unintelligent actor and vice-versa....and a host of other strands and events disgusted me. But even more disgusting were the events affecting me personally which I am about to relate.

My feelings of revulsion began just before the election in ‘79. I recall buying mussels at the market as a cavalcade of Tory cars came hooting around the streets. There were so many cheers and salutes from those shoppers with their patchwork imitation leather bags - I do not know why they added an extra dimension of horror to the scene for me - perhaps because they underscored the very ordinariness of those working class Tories - so much applause that I knew we stood on the brink of a terrible time. I finished my degree, qualified as a teacher and then hesitated,

preferring to spend time with friends I had made in Barcelona for a while, working in various bars and restaurants. In retrospect, those were years of a rather selfish and futile existence and I would have probably drifted on there or the whole decade had I not met Hilary by chance in nearby Salou. Hilary was a nurse, an obviously good and caring person, whose inner glow showed up embarrassingly the pointlessness of my life. We agreed to keep in touch. It was that encounter which persuaded me to return to England, indeed to my native city, to where Hilary had moved from Wiltshire to work.

Bad Language

I began my career in August 1984 in an inner city school, teaching French. The impoverishment of everything I found there depressed me - from the paucity of the materials I was supposed to work with to the shabbiness of many children squeezed into dirty clothes too small for them, but especially the faces of the teachers which expressed all too plainly the futility of the enterprise. Many of the children's faces caught and reflected some of that too, as if they knew, irrespective of how many facts were stuffed into their sleepy heads, that they would never escape their home warren of streets, at the heart of which towered their square-shouldered school, with intimidation mortared into its red bricks, looking down with the contempt of a despot meaning to discipline but disinclined to make more than a token effort at educating. At my interview, I was taken on a tour of the school and was at first impressed by what was proudly presented to me as "team-teaching". Three classes of twelve-year-olds were seated in groups of five or six around tables set together and were busy working with Ladybird books and similar. They were doing "projects". As I walked round it dawned on me that it was little more than a copying-out exercise while the three teachers drank coffee and chatted together, occasionally breaking off to walk around with feigned purposefulness. One, a jolly fat bearded fellow with bleary eyes, confided in me that the kids were "special needs" - that it was at least *warm in the school* and it kept them *off the streets*. Special needs? The last thing they needed was the hovering, indifferent presence of a man not quite recovered from the previous night's drinking bout.

After an attempt to be more liberal and easy-going in the late seventies had gone disastrously wrong, a new headmaster had been appointed there to re-install discipline. His predecessor had outraged staff by doing bizarre things when naughty children had been sent to him, such as giving them money from petty cash to buy model kits from a nearby shop - because they had told him they were bored.

The new head, a gaunt man of about forty, insisted on wearing an academic gown, black and pleated at the shoulders, which terrified the children, particularly as he was called Batley. He had a google eye too and if he yelled in assembly, pointing at a miscreant - *You boy! Stand up!* - nine or ten always did, much to the stifled - very stifled - amusement of other boys, the odd girl and some staff.

Batley did not seem to like me. At the interview he put me in mind of that policeman as he looked me over, mouth-downturned, taking in my long hair and stubbly beard. The navy suit sat uneasily on me - I had borrowed it from a friend - and we were clearly not made for each other. Batley kept looking at my CV and application as if to track down an elusive error. He had a strange upturned nose, too small for his long face. It made me think *smug* and *scornful*. Strange that noses can lead us to judgment....and a nose can make or break you. Mine was just about okay.

Anyway, Batley was a historian but insisted on interviewing me in French. It was half-decent

though sometimes I had to paraphrase my answers for him when his eyebrows shot up in non-comprehension. The county adviser for MFL - whose face seemed familiar - sat next to him with a fixed smile, clearly wishing he could be elsewhere. I saw them glance at one another as I got up to go and knew I had the job. I knew anyway, because my only rival, a lady in her thirties, had only done French as a subsidiary subject - and the large wart on her chin - an obvious target for cruel boys - did her no favours. What a shallow species we are.....

It only became clear to me after my appointment that Batley insisted on teaching three lessons a week in French to the top class in Year 3, from which a few O Level candidates were supposed to emerge. I was tempted to challenge this but as a probationer I had to be careful. He, after all, would decide if I had passed my year or not. Most of the pupils in the fifth year class - there were only twelve who had opted for French - had been entered for CSE. Three were due to do O Level. I shuddered when I saw their work. Their oral French was even worse. Inexperienced though I was, I realised that not one child in the class was capable of a Grade C in the latter or a Grade I in the former. For the first week, I did pronunciation exercises only to drill a decent accent into them. Most were grateful but two girls sat sullenly and hardly speaking, only to say under their breath *Miss Evans...mutter, mutter, mutter*. How long could I allow this to go unchecked?

Eventually I stopped and asked one, a large blonde girl with a pudding basin head, to explain. Miss Evans turned out to be my predecessor. She had taught them all the wrong vowel sounds but had been popular, doubling as a lithe and lusty PE mistress (amply demonstrated by a photo in the staffroom of her with a triumphant netball team.)

I had to be diplomatic. "*Modern French pronunciation has changed a bit over the last few years. Miss Evans taught you the old way.*"

But worse was to come later that week. During a long absence Miss Evans had taken, Mr Batley had drafted himself in to teach the class. I won't bore you - yet - with French grammar, but it soon became obvious to me that he, the arrogant, ignorant arse, had overturned one of the rules Miss Evans had correctly given the class about the use of the perfect tense - which they knew pretty imperfectly anyway - and taught them a nonsense. Perversely - maybe out of sheer terror - they had remembered his version. As soon as I corrected one of the boys, Miss Pudding-Head could contain her indignation no longer.

"But Mr Batley taught us that!"

"Well...it's wrong. I'm sure Mr Batley didn't -"

Before I could finish, almost the whole class rose in revolt and said in unison - *yes he did!*

I must have blushed because the class took my reaction as an admission of defeat and smiled at each other. For me, a rookie, to correct not one teacher but two - one glamorous and popular, the other a feared tyrant - was just too much for them to take. Even the quieter ones, the more studious ones, were shaking their heads in disgust and alarm.

And who could blame them?

Happily, the lesson had only a few minutes to run before break. I packed them away and then went up to see Batley. I deduced from Mrs Hodgekinson's face - his matronly secretary whom he bullied - that he was not in the best of moods.

"I think it's his p-i-l-e-s," she spelt out in a whisper. "mind your Ps and Qs."

I knocked and was admitted. He sat with his palms flat on the table, chewing the inside of his cheek. I told him I was in a difficult position, and, while I outlined the problem as calmly as I could, his pale face grew blotchier.

"I'm in danger of losing the confidence of the class."

“You say that I’ve taught them - that they told you I taught them - that the weather is always described by the imperfect tense?”

“That’s what they’re saying....”

Something in his expression told me that he had realised his error but would rather tell a big lie rather than confess it. He shifted his hams and winced - then brought a trembling hand down on the table, making me jump.

“ABSOLUTE NONSENSE!”

I kept my nerve, having prepared myself for such a reaction.

“In that case, I need you to come along and support me.”

“Support you? How?”

“By telling the class - more or less - what you just told me. I’m losing their respect.”

I told him of the resistance I had met in some quarters regarding pronunciation.

“Miss Evans must have been very popular. They are taking my campaign on pronunciation as an implied criticism of her.”

“Well...isn’t it? Maybe you need to learn a little tact and diplomacy, young man! It could be deemed unprofessional conduct to denigrate a colleague!”

This retort and his aggression took me entirely aback. The state of his anus was no excuse. Now he looked theatrically at his watch and I saw the crucial matters on my mind - and the ultimate success of 5FR - - and mine - receding into a mist of his making.

“I really need your help! For the good of the class. They won’t believe me because I’m young and new. They believe you - because *you* are the boss!”

To my relief, this dollop of smarm seemed to work. Drumming his fingers, he smiled and said “Yes. Yes I am, aren’t I.”

But the stare, the power-stare he was fixing on me was anything but friendly. For a few seconds I was allowed to plumb the nasty depths - or rather shallows - of Mr Clive Batley, BA Hons. Then a thought struck him. His google eye swivelled to look at the roster cellotaped to his table. As if in shock, he took a dramatic breath and exclaimed that I was missing my yard duty.

I walked around the yard as if in a nightmare, with all the strength drained out of me. The cacophony of the children, the jinking, leaping, pushing, running confusion of their legs and bodies, the hooting, revving, brumming traffic beyond the high walls combined to make my head spin. I had landed on a hostile planet. An isolated figure, with all my heart I wished myself away. My watch told me there were six minutes of this hell to endure. At least I had a free period to look forward to, could collect my thoughts and make a plan.

A tug on my sleeve made me turn round. There stood pretty Kuldip Kaur, by my early estimate, the most able pupil in 5FR, looking up at me with black saucer eyes.

“Mr Bray. I’m really worried I’m going to fail French. I need it to get into sixth form college. I’m only doing three other O Levels.”

“Three?”

“Yes, Maths, English and History. The other teachers will only enter me for CSE.”

“That’s crazy.”

“My dad says so.”

I realised at once, having listened to a conversation in the staffroom, that they were playing safe. Double entries cost money. I looked down into her pleading eyes.

“Well, Kuldip. I guarantee you will not fail French.”

Her face lit up in a lovely smile, a sudden light on my dark horizon. She walked back to her

friends, all Asians, beautiful and calm in this screeching chaos. We exchanged smiles. I had allies. The shocking bell broke the spell.

I waited until the yard was empty and could see classes settling down through the ground floor windows. It was a dark, overcast morning of low cloud and the lights were on in those rooms.

They were scenes of gold and green, the green being the colour of blazers and jumpers.

Inexplicably, it made me feel queezy. I went to stand at the railings of the tall gate, locked during lessons, and for a while watched people and traffic about their business in another world.

In the empty silence, my footsteps echoed on the stone steps of the staircase as I made my way to the staffroom, dragging my fingers on the shiny green bricks which had been specially selected by a committee of goblins for their ugliness. The staff lived on the third floor and as I drew closer I heard the voice of Mrs Wardle, the Head of Girls PE, reach a crescendo of displeasure. There was a queue of damp little girls with bags too big for them, waiting in the Top Hall to go into their changing room, looking bewildered as a lecture on the merits of standing still was delivered. It would doubtless serve to waste a few minutes of the lesson.

I entered the staffroom to find a flustered - and relieved - Mrs Hodgekinson.

“Ah, Mr Bray! Thank goodness! You’re covering Mrs Patel’s Geography lesson.”

“No I’m not. Look. Mrs Sharkey’s down for that.”

I pointed to the cover timetable on the notice board but she shook her head.

“Sorry.... She had to go home ill at break.”

She came closer. “His Nibs told me to come and find you. He’s in a froth. I’d get over there double quick if I were you.”

Glummer than that wet Monday morning, I picked up my bag, retraced my faltering steps and hurried out into the spitting rain. Humanities were taught in a double-decker mobile in the far corner of the yard.

As I entered the hushed room, Batley looked at his watch, glared at me, and, without a word - only with a loud, disgusted intake of breath into that ridiculously small nose - strode past me and slammed the door.

As luck would have it, Kuldip Kaur was in the room, face already buried in her book. Laura Lapworth, aka Miss Pudding-Head, was also there, on the back row, face behind hand, announcing to her neighbours that I was *in the shit*. I issued a final warning to get on - or else stand out in the rain - by then decidedly set in - and the class fell truculently silent. After a decent interval, I coughed and beckoned to Kuldip to come out and bring her bag. I asked her for her French exercise book. Batley had told me the previous week that he had taught the class for the whole of the summer term. Leafing back through pages and pages of grammar notes - and little else - I eventually found what I was looking for on a page dated June 28th. It was all about weather...*il faisait beau...il faisait du brouillard...* next to crayoned pictures of sunshine and fog, etc, etc. - the usual time-wasters. And at the bottom was a sentence which I produce verbatim

To describe the weather ALWAYS use the IMPERFECT tense.

Laura was looking at me from the back row. I smiled and asked her to bring me her bag. She frowned and asked why. I told her I just needed to check on something. She stood, scraped her chair as loud as she could, and marched out. I asked her to follow me into the lobby, and warned the rest to get on.

“Show me your French exercise book, please Laura.”

“It’s really....scruffy.”

“Not to worry.”

I flicked back through half-written pages adorned with fair caricatures of Batley while she looked on shame-faced.

“Do you like Art, Laura?”

She nodded. I grinned and she softened a little. Eventually, I found the page I was looking for. Apart from its scruffiness, it was the same as Kuldip’s. I had proof, proof!

Perhaps you never did French. Perhaps you did, but never got as far as the imperfect -or did but misunderstood the rule. Perhaps, like so many of your compatriot monoglots - and like many of my colleagues, (more of them later) - you never gave a shit, one way or the other. Bear with me a minute... ..you never know...all might fall into place, and the next thing, you might be enrolling at night school on a refresher course....

Well, the imperfect tense sets scenes: *It was a rainy September day; the leaves were falling and a breeze was freezing my spirits.....*a developing, unfinished situation, possibly the prelude to a narrative.....therefore imperfect tense. **But....***Last Monday it rained all day.....*(Lundi dernier il a plu toute la journée) is a finished action because last Monday has gone, like hope, for ever, therefore: perfect tense = il a plu NOT *il pleuvait*. Perhaps, esteemed Reader, you forgot the rule, like Batley - or maybe the arrogant fucker never knew it. Test it out: - would you say *last Monday it was raining all day* or - *it rained all day*?

May I rest my case?

“Sir, I’m cold...can I go back in?”

“Just a minute, Laura. Do you believe I have your best interests at heart? And want you to get a Grade 1 at CSE?”

She thought this over before replying - with reluctance - that she supposed so.

“No supposing. Do you believe me?”

“Alright.....yes.”

“I have a decent degree in French and Spanish from Nottingham University. Mr Batley does not. He did his level best....but he made a small mistake...in this one instance.”

I showed her the page. She looked down, looked up at me and smiled. I opened the door and we went back in. Laura could not resist saying *Batman cocked it up* under her breath. The class laughed but quickly I shushed them by folding my arms - a trick learnt from my TP tutor.

“Laura, you will apologize.”

“All we ever did was copy out off the board.”

“LAURA....that will do. Say it...Come on....”

“.....Sorry.”

“Didn’t quite hear that...”

“SORRY.....I ever chose French.”

In spite of the titters, I decided I had not heard. This was as good as I would get from that repulsive girl.

At lunch I went over to the staffroom and put the two exercise books, with a piece of paper marking those pages, in Batley’s in-tray. At close of school they were in my pigeon-hole, posted without comment.

I went back to my flat feeling very disconsolate and uncertain; disconsolate for having been so

stupid to take a job in such a school; uncertain as to whether I had said enough to win Laura over. She had a lot of influence on the group. Perhaps I was worrying too much about a minor point of grammar - particularly in view of their many shortcomings. Would they not forget all about the incident if I showed how committed I was? I could surely revise the tense rules in many subtle ways, from different angles, without provoking the likes of Laura.

Then it came to me. A brand new departure from the tedious routine they had followed might do the trick. After supper, I began work on a series of OHTs to present a communicative topic - the latest super-duper thinking in the county - to encourage the kids to talk about something topical and personal to them. In short, a summer holiday. It would provide a natural environment to "smuggle grammar in" (the buzz concept at that time), involving the use of the past tense *and* create opportunities to revise and consolidate the present tense (*I like* (Yarmouth)...it is on the *east coast*....There is a nice *beach*.....you can *swim, play crazy golf*.....etc, etc, etc), as well extend the subject matter to bring in the future tense (Next year we will visit *Scotland*...we will *tour* with our caravan.....etc,etc,etc.) and even the conditional (I would love to *visit*....) The project would generate a lot of language, both oral and written; it could provide material for comprehension exercises. The tired, dog-eared text books could be put at the back of the stock cupboard for good.

Batley was not man enough to admit his mistake to the class, so I was forced to create diversions. A blessing in disguise? Hilary went to bed at eleven, leaving me to carry on working. By three I had a pile of illustrated transparencies, many worksheets to run off on the banda machine and a detailed plan.....

(However, I will admit here that it never entered my head that well over half of that class had not been on holiday that summer. When it came to writing about a holiday experience and Laura muttered something to that effect, I told the class to describe any holiday they had had. I was shocked to discover that quite a few - and not just amongst the Asian contingent - had never been to the seaside.)

A curt note on torn yellow paper in my pigeon-hole the next morning instructed me to report to HRHBatley instead of going to assembly. I found him sitting next to a fat jaundiced-looking fellow I sort of recognized. It was Cllr Roberts the Chairman of Governors. He and Batley looked grim. Had they both got piles?

"I would like to kno-o-w, Mr Bray, why you took in those two exercise books from 5FR pupils yesterday - in a *Geography* lesson - *and* what comments you made thereupon...."

Well, you sore, pompous arse, I happen to teach that class - *and* therefore it is my business to see their books whenever and wherever I choose.....

"Well, putting on one side for a moment how you have come to know about it....the girl Kuldip Kaur came to me in the yard, worried about her chances next June. Both girls were in the class I was landed with when I was free..."

"*Landed* with? I find such language *most* inappropriate and unprofessional, Mr Bray. It is every teacher's duty to cover for absent colleagues and to do their utmost for those classes in spite of their specialism lying elsewhere.....Besides, you were the only member of staff available...."

Apart from you, you idle bastard.....

".....I lost a free last Friday. There were others in the staffroom playing bridge when I came in...."

Roberts looked at Batley with a face which said *can that be true?*

"That, is a shameful allegation, Mr Bray!"

OK, it was stupid to provoke him but it was the truth.

“Well...maybe they were just finishing off a contract from break. It was the Maths department mainly...maybe they were developing a module around playing cards....”

I kept my face impassive while this sunk in. Batley knew I was taking the piss, but what could he say? He insisted I answer the question he had asked me.

“Well, I needed to check on their grammar notes regarding the point I raised with you yesterday break. You taught them all through June?”

“I did.”

First, I fished Kuldip’s book out of my bag - but then changed my mind and gave him Laura’s.

“Well, as you can see, the notes you gave them on June 29th were wrong. You had this book yesterday in your tray. Did you look?”

He looked flustered to be put on the back foot. He read the page through and handed it back.

“I admit,” he said after a pause “that I phrased said note in a less than unambiguous way....”

You mean WRONG.

“...But I repeat...what reason did you give the girls for taking their books?”

“None. I just took them.”

“And did they notice which page you chose to look at?”

“Kuldip, no. Laura, yes. She is the ringleader of the anti-me faction - and, as you can see, quite a disaffected young lady.”

I opened her book to a beautiful biro drawing of Batley with an axe convincingly buried in his head, with his eyes at ten to two. Did Roberts have to suppress a smirk?

Two birds with one stone - olé!

Batley ordered me to put the book away.

“And *what* did you have to say to the girl? About the page in question? ”

Should I lie? No, he would interview Laura - perhaps already had.

“I told her there was an error.”

“You mean, you undermined me...with a pupil...of that...*type*. Disgraceful, unprofessional.”

“That is going too far. I asked her to trust me as I am highly qualified. Your field is History. If I covered your absence and told a class that Richard III had won the Battle of Bosworth, I hope I would have been....”

Big enough...

“.....Concerned enough to admit and rectify my mistake.”

To this he made no reply. Cllr Roberts looked at me quizzically.

“Can’t you see,” he said “that staff have to support each other in a tough school like this? Have you not heard what a shambles Upperton High used to be before Mr Batley’s arrival? I can only excuse your conduct on the grounds of your inexperience.”

This infuriated me so much that I could not reply, there was so much wanting to emerge from my mouth at once. Batley reached theatrically for a piece of paper with a pupil’s scrawl on, and read part of it aloud with relish.

“*When Laura came back in she said **Batley cocked it up**. Mr Bray heard her but let her off.*”

“Not true - I made her apologize -”

“Apologize? Apologize?” rejoined Roberts. “These kids don’t see that as a punishment. They’d laugh in your face!”

“You ...should...have...sent her.....directly....to ME!” roared Batley, shifting his hams, moving in for the kill. Now he had me. The issue of his incompetence and his littleness had been obscured - again - this time by my mishandling of a disciplinary matter - the worst - the open

denigration of our Leader by a pupil.

“Mr Batley has striven to restore order to my school. And I will not see it undermined by a trendy-lefty novice!”

I asked him what my politics had to do with it, and how he had deduced what they were. He refused to answer. I tried then to be diplomatic.....

“Mr Batley’s...understandable...error has put me in a very difficult position vis-à-vis a fifth year class. I tried to explain to Laura that it was a *small* error - which it is in the great scheme of things - but kids see it differently - especially if they’re worried about their exams. I tried to be tactful - ask Laura -”

“I already have.”

“And?”

“She said you said I made a “boob””

Laura was having her revenge. In fact, the words he had just read out from that scrap I had glimpsed reminded me very much of her handwriting.

“Laura Lapworth is a child, Mr Bray...”

You mean a devious fat cow...

“...You do not share confidences with children as if they are equals.”

“Well, you should have agreed to come along to the class as I asked, and you still could if...if...”

“If what?”

.....you weren’t such a fucking cunt.

“If you had my interests at heart. This is my probationary year. It is your role to support me and encourage me. For my sake and the sake of the kids.”

To my surprise and fury, a tear welled up in the corner of my eye. Batley steepled his fingers and leant back in his swivel chair, smirking in triumph. He did not have time, he said, or the inclination to visit classrooms over trivial matters.

“You are the teacher. Assert yourself. If anyone speaks out of turn, ask - *how dare you question my authority?! This is a school, not a debating society. You can impose your authority without undermining colleagues. NO - you will and must! If any child questions that authority, punish it! There is no need to justify yourself when it comes to discipline.*”

This was undeserved!

“You have made a poor start, Mr Bray. After the glowing recommendation of the MFL advisor, the Head and I expected better, much better.”

The councillor’s warning hung in the air like a smell. I was about to defend myself when the bell rang for first lesson, causing the meeting to break up without ceremony.

Fortunately, I had an easy lesson with 1A, otherwise I might have walked out there and then.

Within half-an-hour I had regained my composure and my morale. A poor start? I would invite the two of them in to observe me teach that star class - virgins with which no Incompetents had tampered.

The attack on my handling of awkward children rankled the more I thought about it. In respect of discipline, I had no serious problems. My height was quite imposing and my even features, though unremarkable, had nothing about them likely to inspire ridicule. I was also able to project an aura of calm assurance. And anyway, the high ceilings, the huge spaces, pervasive gloom and stagnant air all conspired with the nasty immanence of Batley to subdue the spontaneity of the children and keep them in their assigned place. The ancient architect had surely never been given the brief: *inspire Awe and Terror* but had done a remarkable job nonetheless. Only in the Art mobile – an outcast from the proper job of inculcation, and away from the suffocating influence

of the building – was a chaos - of paint-flicking and paper-shredding – the norm. Everyone dreaded the absence of Cynthia Long, the Bohemian Head of Art; covering for her was like sitting on a torpid monster.

But where was I.....

...OHPs

There were only four overhead projectors in the school and they had to be booked out from Resources at least a day in advance via four timetables pinned to the staff notice board. It began to be noticed - maybe Mrs Smyczek, the sour resources lady, had pointed it out - that my initials were appearing more and more. One day it led to a confrontation with Barry Reece, aka Reecy. “Flip! I wanted to show my transpa-rencies of the Califor-nian fruit ranch to 3C tomorrow - and there’s only Bertha left..... (*Bertha was OHP B - the oldest, smelliest and noisiest machine.*)..... You’re u-sing OHPs nearly all the time now, Pa-trick. How can the rest of us get a loo-kin?”

Reecy was a paunchy prop forward, red-faced and raw-boned, with decided views on most things, including the utility of teaching French to deprived inner-city kids. His sarcastic remarks were meant to provoke me and always set the card table in a roar whenever I appeared.

“Bonjour Monsieur,” he would say with exaggerated nasality “Quelle est la date aujourd’hui?” - or other witty variables. I always decided to play along and answer him affably as I made my coffee in the kettle corner.

But now was no longer a time for banter. His implied scorn now became open.

“Don’t you e-ver use a text book?” he demanded to know, as if it really was his business. “This to do with arty-farty new thin-king they’re teaching in the colleges now?”

“Phasing it out, Mr Reece. Copies falling to bits. Old as the hills. Kids deserve better.”

“These kids? Most of ‘em can’t talk their own language pro-per. And they’ll ne-ver go to France. What’s the point?”

“Equality of opportunity.”

“Equality of opportunity? Socialist claptrap! Be realistic. The Asians will leave and open takeaways - the Whites will go on the dole or steal cars.”

Perhaps it was naughty of me - I saw my chance to wind him up as tight as a watch. I went to sit in my armchair in the more liberal corner of the room where Rev Ted - aka Red Ted - always sat with lovely Nila Patel.

“Education is more than preparation for work...it should be an eye-opener...a window on the world...a path away from ignorance.....FLs are part of that.....they take kids out of themselves and add another dimension. I loathe Thatcher’s utilitarian views on education....”

Some groaned, some applauded.

“Co-mmie BULLSHIT!”

Mel Wainde on the card table was complaining. “Come on Reecy, pick your hand up. I’ve got twenty points here!”

“Wasting your time, Pat.” whispered Ted in his East Anglian brogue. “They’d have French back off the timetable if it was down to them.”

I decided to announce my reply. ““Only the top two sets do it here anyway. In the county everybody does it.”

“Well, out in the coun-ty is where the posh folk live. They have those fancy gite places and such.....Have you bloody well fixed these cards, Waindey Boy? Got a sodding Yar-borough

here, near enough!!”

At the staffroom door, Mrs Wardle had begun demonstrating again the right way to give a child a bollocking, and everyone stopped to listen as her voice reached a climax.

“....The third or fourth time this term - in four weeks - you, Miss Kalsi, have forgotten your kit. Go home and get it NOW!”

She slammed the door. “I really do think that people are getting more stupid....”

Ted looked over the top of his Guardian and down his glasses. “I totally agree, Margaret. Just look at the opinion polls.”

Margaret, Ted had informed me, was married to a Tory councillor for a snooty village *where scruffs were liable to be shot on sight*. As his comment sunk in, even the card table had to laugh. Margaret glared at our corner and flounced out.

At quarter-past-one somebody pointed out that I had a scrap of the dreaded yellow notepaper in my pigeon-hole. I was summoned to appear at 1:40. And I had planned to get my marking out of the way as I was going out with Hilary for a birthday bash.

This time, Batman sat without his gross Boy Wonder, fondling two letters.

“I’m very sorry to disturb your lunch-hour....”

I bet you are....

“...But as you are teaching all afternoon, I thought it in your best interests for you to see these two letters as soon as possible.”

How jolly decent and considerate of you, you hypocrite.

He placed them on the table and I read the following.

Dear Mr Battson,

We are both worried that Lauras new French teacher is teaching her wrong. She loved it with Miss Evans but now she hate’s it,

Yours.....

Dear Mr Baston,

My daughter Kuldip is crying about French she is needing for exams. Please can she get extra help with RULES

Yours.....

Dear Mr Bastard,

If you had the guts to come along to my room and apologize.....

“So, what do you want me to do?” I asked him.

“You should meet the parents to reassure them.”

“But I’ve already told Kuldip she will pass. This letter is dated five days ago. *You* could write to Laura’s mum and tell her that *you* made the mistake.”

“It’s no longer a question of an insignificant error. By your insensitivity you have managed to

destroy a girl's love of the subject."

Love of the bloody subject! She loathes it.

"My insensitivity? The standards of 5FR were so poor that I had to intervene. Couldn't you tell they weren't up to scratch? Orally awful, and grammatically...well...muddled to say the least. It would have been dishonest to pretend otherwise."

"You handled it badly. You destroyed confidence....."

"No. I destroyed *misplaced* confidence. Now we're rebuilding. They like my new topic."

"The class seemed good on the whole to me!"

"With the greatest respect, Mr Batley, you are not qualified to make such a judgment. You only have an A Level from twenty years ago."

"And you, Mr..... have only four weeks experience - and none at teaching O Level."

I was prepared for this, having confided in Red Ted Hadley and been given sound advice.

"May I make a suggestion? This needs the appraisal of a third party. Why not ask David Smythe in to observe the class and look at their work?"

Smythe was the MFL advisor who had sat, dentition clenched, throughout our interview. Batley had clearly not expected this - eminently wise and reasonable - proposal to emerge from my rookie mouth, and it left him temporarily speechless. Eventually, he asked who had put such a thought in my head. I questioned the relevance of the question.

"To me, it's a way out of a Catch 22."

"A what?"

"Well, if the class fails, I will get the blame, even though I only taught them for a year. You argue that they were fine when you taught them. Now that I'm trying to undo years of...."

Rotten

".....less than adequate teaching - and as a professional I have no choice - I am accused of damaging morale - which would also be used against me when they fail. How can I win? If you think they are good on the whole, why not take them in the fifth year yourself? You get the credit. I'll swap them with you for 3A."

"Inadequate teaching?"

"Yes. They can hardly string a sentence together and their written work is abysmal."

"In your view!"

"Exactly! Let Mr Smythe come in and appraise them. I would abide by his judgment. Would you?"

He looked thunderous, then said he was far too busy to take over an exam class. But his darting eyes showed that he could think of no good reason to refuse my other challenge. Finally, grudgingly, he said he would think it over. I rose to go but he drew up one of those rapid indignant sniffs into that ridiculous nose.... It had been brought to his attention that I was *very selfishly* monopolising the OHPs.

"Other staff are having to change lesson plans at the last moment."

"Selfish? Only one colleague objected, and he had the option of Bertha. The machines are underused in my opinion."

"But why so? Why do you need to borrow one so often?"

"I'm introducing my own materials. Communicative teaching gets the kids speaking."

"And the text book?"

"Is where it belongs."

"Belongs?"

"Back of the stock cupboard."

He leant back and made the swivel chair squeak. It might have come from him.

“Mr Bray.....”

Here we go, amateur dramatics.....

“.....you...have...no..RIGHT to alter the syllabus without my approval. Syllabi are written in consultation and not unilaterally.....”

Silly B....

“...I see no reason to *smile*....”

“I’m sorry. I tend to smile when stressed...”

“You will restore the text book to its rightful position at the centre of the syllabus. As of now.”

“But it is a poor teaching tool, hardly any good even for reading comprehension. It gives no stimuli for oral expression - and half the class don’t even know where you are on the page.”

“It did perfectly well for Miss Evans - who purchased the course at great expense, may I add.”

“Perfectly well?”

Now I played the other card which wise old Ted had given me. I asked to see the percentages of those opting for French at the end of Year 3 - and the pass rates for GCE and CSE, with grades.

He looked alarmed, but how could he refuse?

“Why so?”

“To compare them with other city and county schools.”

“But all they will confirm is that this a most deprived area.....”

Deprived of good teaching....

“Your request is denied.”

“Mr Batley...do you wish me to resign?” (last card)

“Of course not!”

“Then allow me to teach in a manner which suits me. If I enjoy my work, the kids will enjoy theirs - and thrive.”

I was winning the argument and he was getting more vexed.

“David Smythe’s new methods - et alia....at that hotbed of left-wing vipers at the School of Education - do not meet with my approval. They are not tried and tested, therefore unsafe. You will reintroduce the text book until a proper evaluation of trendy methods has been carried out. I am DIRECTING you to do so. Your use of overhead projectors will be occasional and minimal, as an adjunct, NOT the mainstay of your methodology. Otherwise, they will burn out early. Do you realise how much the special bulbs cost? Do you not know how tight our budget is this year? Furthermore, I wish you to write and reassure these parents - draft a letter and let me have it in my tray first thing tomorrow.”

My way home took me past a branch of Jessops. I pulled onto the forecourt. Within five minutes, I had bought a beautiful OHP for £95 - with two spare bulbs thrown in for free. The next morning I dropped the receipt into Mrs Hodgekinson - with a note requesting reimbursement from my departmental capitation - and left the following letters I had been instructed to write.

Dear Mr Singh,

I wish to assure you that Kuldip will pass her GCE with at least a Grade C. As well as introducing intensive pronunciation and grammar work in class, I shall be holding one lunch-hour session a week for extra practice. I do hope Kuldip and other candidates will attend

Yours....

Dear Mrs Lapworth,

I am working hard to bring Laura's French up to Grade 1 standard, by polishing her accent and grammar. In the short term - as I have told the class - this may cause her some difficulty, but in the long term it should pay dividends.

I also mentioned the lunchtime session, knowing full well that Laura would never attend. When she failed the following year, that would be my get-out-of-jail-free card.

Not many days later, Batley decided to pay me a surprise visit - but I had already anticipated it. My classroom on the ground floor afforded me a clear view across the hall to the dark mouth of the staircase from where, like a gigantic bat, he would be bound to emerge.

I had been amazing 1A with my supernatural powers by "guessing" pupils' birthdays. (I had cheated a little by having a list copied out from their register on my table!)

"C'est en mai, ton anniversaire, Ajay?"

Gasp..... "Oui, monsieur!"

"Le treize....non,non.....le quatorze mai!"

"OUI!"

Gasps all round.....

Then I spotted him, a black shape looming large and larger, gown flowing behind him, striding towards us with a purpose. I switched off my OHP and pointed to the page number I had written on the board. In a trice, all the books, placed ready on desk corners, were open before he entered. The class shot obediently to its feet. Batley said *Bonjour, asseyez-vous* and I began to work through a very tedious exercise about the months in the book. I chalked the various dates on the board and their hands shot up - they were an enthusiastic, confident class. Batley sat at the back looking smug. He clearly thought his advocacy of the text book was thus vindicated, unaware that their enjoyment of speaking had already been established solely by other "trendy-lefty" means. Idiot. He did not even notice the newness of the OHP - my adjunct - as he left with his tiny nose haughtily poised - because - I suspected - he had never used one. (An OHP - not a nose.....except perhaps to win favour with the councillor).

Who Dares Wins?

A few weeks afterwards, Hilary persuaded me to go to a meeting of the local CND group. I had always sympathised with the cause, and stories emerging about government plans to allow the Yanks to site Cruise missiles in the southern counties of England had set me thinking.

I came away alarmed and convinced that Thatcher was deranged, because such a deployment was part of a new and nutty ultra-right-wing view of nuclear weapons which went way beyond M.A.D. and deterrence - a view that a nuclear war could be won by a surprise first strike with weapons of incredible accuracy which could "take out" an enemy's missiles and his ability to retaliate. Cruise missiles had been designed to do that very thing, and - do you remember? - they were meant to be mobile on lorries, so that the Soviets would be unable to find them and destroy them first. Marjorie Thompson, however, the speaker at the meeting, described a nightmare scenario - that the whole of southern England might, in an extreme crisis, be blitzed by the Soviets in an overwhelming first-strike to pre-empt the launch of Cruise. Armageddon - which

formerly might have arrived due to mistrust, miscalculation and accident - now seemed more likely due to new military "thinking." That evening, I joined the group and bought a shiny silver badge. The next morning I wore it proudly on my lapel.

At lunchtime I was chatting to Ted when I notice Margaret Wardle looking at me very severely. "What's up with her?" I murmured after she had eventually sauntered out.

"It might be your badge. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if she's on her way to see his highness right now."

"Oh....sugar."

"Stand your ground. We're not a police state - yet."

I waited all afternoon for a summons, and I thought I had got away with it until the bell went. A red-faced Mrs Hodgekinson was tapping at my door. It was obvious from her expression, as if she was a pale moon reflecting an angry setting sun, what mood *He* was in. I told her there was no need to say anything.

"Tell him I'll pack away and be straight up."

He was sitting with his privy councillor again - Roberts (who, I had found out from Ted, was Healeyite Labour - Denis Healey, deadly opponent of the Bennite Left and unilateralism).

Roberts fixed his watery eye on my lapel as soon as I came in, cleared his throat and began thus: "I expect all my staff to keep their politics to themselves, Mr Bray. So I must ask you not to wear that badge in school.....it is not....."

Batley sat in an aura of self-righteousness, google-eyeing us alternately as I sat in a stiff silence and Roberts droned on about the incompatibility of impressionable minds and teachers with a political agenda.

"...so let me make it clear...politics...has....no....place in school!" he concluded, delivering each word with a karate chop on the air, as if he was on the panel of Question Time. Batley took my glum silence as a symptom of abject rout, looked at his watch and thanked his Chairman. Then something stirred in me as it had at the police station ten years before, and all the disgust with the two of them and that horrid decade decided me not to be bullied ANYMORE.

"Politics has no place in school? History is all politics! And all the values we impart, conscious or otherwise, are political. Keep politics out of school? Impossible."

They were both taken aback by my vehemence. We were already well into October and Roberts was wearing a poppy.

"You are wearing a poppy."

"And?"

"It could be construed as indirect support for the bearing of arms."

"Nonsense!"

"No, it *could* be. There! A debate! It *is* political."

"This is outrageous!"

"No more or less outrageous than you taking exception to my anti-nuclear badge."

"The CND is a...left-wing...."

"CND is non-aligned. There is a Conservative branch affiliated to it - not vice-versa - and an ex-Services branch."

"Labour, my party - to my disgust - supports unilateralism..."

"That's their affair."

"It's tantamount to saying you support Labour!"

"No it is not. How I vote is my private business. I would not discuss party politics with you - or the Head - and certainly not with children."

“But it shows you support a very controversial.....er....”

“Your lack of a badge suggests that you do not. *Not* advocating a political stance and *not* being prepared to discuss an issue is also a political attitude.”

Batley had sat looking like a tennis spectator throughout. I had recently covered a history lesson for Christine Parr - a staunch and fusty ally of Margaret Wardle - and had been appalled.

“Go to Mrs Parr’s mobile. You teach History, Mr Batley - you must be aware of her displays. Go and see all her pro-Nato posters. The kids get Nato propaganda - subliminally - four times a week. It could be construed as brainwashing. If she takes her posters down, I might consider removing my badge. Goodbye.”

I drove home singing to a tape of Status Quo turned up to full volume.

The next morning, I found a very smart envelope in my pigeon-hole at break. Its contents filled me with dismay though not surprise.

Dear Mr Bray,

Following on from our meeting, I find it necessary to bring to your attention a number of areas in which your conduct has been found to be less than satisfactory.

1 - You have alienated many pupils and parents. As well as previous complaints which have already been raised with you, I am now dealing with new ones regarding your arrogance and insensitivity and which question your competence.

2 - You have shown a wilful disregard for procedures well established in this school:

i - in the booking out of equipment

ii - in altering a syllabus and pedagogical approach without due consultation.

3 - You have purchased a major piece of equipment without consulting me, a member of your department and your Headmaster.

4 - You have antagonized other staff and the Chairman of Governors by sporting certain insignia, in contravention of official school policies relating to political matters.

I hardly need point out the importance of behaving reasonably and professionally in such a crucial year for you. Any further misconduct may be deemed grounds for issuing an oral warning to you.

I have copied this letter to Mr Paul Starkey, representative of your Professional Association. I urge to consult with him as to what consequences may follow, should such a disciplinary measure - and others - become necessary.

Ted asked me what was wrong and I passed him the letter. Immediately, he got to his feet and fetched a copy of the staff handbook from his locker. Leafing through, he began to read aloud from paragraph 22.

“*Staff will refrain from discussing matters of a non-curricular nature with pupils - be they political or religious, or matters of a personal, sensitive or emotional nature which belong rightfully in the private sphere.....* No mention of insignia - badges, the pompous arse. If he calls you in again, refuse until I can be fetched. Has he never told you you’re entitled to have a friend with you, making notes if necessary?”

“No.”

“No? And he dares go on about procedures, the hypocrite!”

He lowered his voice as one of the card school appeared to be listening. “And as far as the N.U.T and Starkers goes, forget it. Batley runs rings round him. If he wants to give you an oral warning, there’s nowt the union can do except hold your hand and make sure he does it proper. Like holding your hand until you reach the edge of the cliff, then letting go with a big kiss…….You realise you can’t pass with an oral warning? It lasts a whole year.”

“Now I’ve got the wind up. What can I do?”

“Write *him* a letter. Quote this paragraph. Copy it to the Chairman, and - this’ll put the wind up *him!* - copy it to the Director of Education. You are being bullied, the damned coward. Picking on a newcomer.”

“But how does he get away with it?”

“He picks on the weakest. Most of the staff here want to keep their noses clean and tow the line. Nobody likes the man but he does terrify the kids - and that’s fine by them. Just stand up to him.”

“But it’s my probationary year.”

“You could do a deal with him. Promise to leave if he passes you. Call his bluff, because I reckon he knows you’re a fine teacher. You’re always on your feet, Sally Evans was always on her backside. He’s not blind - if *I* can tell, so can he! He’s just trying to break you like a colt. Write your letter and I’ll have a look at it.”

After many attempts and suggestions from Ted, this is the letter which eventually got typed up and sent with copies to Cllr Roberts and Sir Cyril Barber, Director of Education.

Dear Mr Batley,

I am worried that our professional relationship is in danger of breaking down. I am determined to do all I can to prevent this. I wish to answer those charges you have made against me, and to raise issues of concern to me.

1 - It has been an unavoidable consequence, I think, of me correcting errors and insufficiencies, that certain pupils have taken it badly. I have acted at all times with patience and sensitivity, and have emphasized to pupils the long term (exam success) over any short term doubt and anxiety. Having already written to two parents, I would be happy to repeat those assurances to others who have raised concerns.

2 - I have, I admit, booked out OHPs very frequently, but on only one occasion did this result in minor conflict with a colleague. My training was based very much on transparency projection in a communicative mode of teaching. I had not been long at Upperton High before I realised that staff demand for OHPs was low, and so I did not see a problem. As for altering the syllabus, the subject matter is as it was before I came, only the means of delivery has changed somewhat. The textbook is still in use, in conjunction with the OHP……

3 - ……as the capitation for French is my responsibility, I decided to purchase a machine for the exclusive use of the department in order to avoid any future problems. I apologize for not consulting you. This was due to my inexperience.

4 - I quote from the staff handbook: “....(as was read out by Ted above)....”

This paragraph does not mention badges. Furthermore, Britain is a free society and I have a perfect right to wear a CND badge. It is a matter of principle for me to show where I stand on such a vital issue - no matter where I am.

You have criticised my conduct, Mr Batley, yet have refused to visit my classroom to admit to a mistake you made last year. This has put me in a very difficult position vis à vis certain pupils, causing them to doubt rules which they need to know - and raising the very doubts regarding my competence of which you complain!

Furthermore, you have not responded to my request - in September - to invite the adviser for MFL to assess the examination class in question, about whose abilities and knowledge we cannot agree. I am, as previously stated, quite prepared to abide by his verdict and recommendations.

In conclusion, may I add that I would welcome any support and advice you might yet decide to provide for me in my probationary year,

Yours,

“The *yet* in the final paragraph makes it clear he’s letting you down,” growled Ted, as he passed me the letter back. “The director will see that. Make a photocopy of Batley’s letter and include it.”

As she will soon play a part in my downfall, I think it is time to mention Barbara, the deputy head. She was a Scot, a formidable woman, measuring around 4 ft x 4ft with grey hair, grey face, grey cardigan and grey skirt. Barbara Green was her name but Grey would have suited her far better in the shabby twilight of her career. In my first month I found out two significant things about her - **1** - she was simmering with resentment, having seen her ambition and expectation of leading the school thwarted by the accession of Batley - and **2** - that her greyness of face was the result of a steady, if unspectacular, consumption of malt whisky even during the day which made her temper unpredictable, veering from excessive familiarity to downright hostility. It was my misfortune, due to my age and lefty look to provoke usually the latter. Her key ally on the staff was Margaret Wardle with whom she shared a pessimistic view of children and, apparently, our species in general. I’ll come back to her later.....

Gordon, the loner on the staff, our music teacher, surprised me one morning by walking into my classroom when I was free. He had not been able to avoid, he admitted rather shyly, overhearing some of what Ted and I had been discussing.

“Owen had some queer ideas - (*he meant the previous Head*) - but he was a human being and the kids loved him. A few took advantage, but they always do....he’d have loved you, Patrick. The people on the staff who couldn’t stick him were the old timers and lazy teachers. Batley is a nasty piece of work. I just want to warn you not to push him too far.”

He began to tell me the secret story of my predecessor, Sally Evans.

“Wardle was jealous of her because she was so kind and popular with the kids. She was pretty and elegant, so she fell foul of Green as well. Wardle and her are poison. When I first came, I had a horrible feeling that she - I mean Wardle - was after me.”

He shuddered and looked at me full on with his candid blue eyes and immediately I understood.

We nodded to one another and needed to say nothing.

“Precisely. I gave her no encouragement at all, of course. So I’m sure it was either her or Green who started a rumour that Sally and I were having an affair. All we ever did was go out for a quiet drink odd lunchtimes to get away from the stifling atmosphere of the staffroom. Anyway, she began to tell me what a swine Batley was being to her. She was the first to admit her accent and fluency were a bit ropey - but she knew the grammar. The kids did okay in the exams, not brilliant, but okay. The French adviser happened to drop by and asked to observe her - no problem. They got on well. Afterwards, he recommended she go on a course in Normandy the county was running, but Batley put his foot down. Said the school couldn’t afford it. So instead, he gave her till Easter to put it right herself, by listening to French radio and so on.. *Then* he would invite the adviser back to reassess her...and if there wasn’t an improvement, he would *take the matter further*. That’s all he would say - just left a threat hanging over her. When the rumour about us surfaced - even the kids knew it - it was the last straw. I even offered to come out of the closet to scotch it.....Sally said she would have to tell her husband - he plays golf with Reece - and make something up. But after Easter she never came back. Between the three of them, they ruined her career. I’m telling you this in confidence - only Nila knows - to show you what you’re up against. Ted’s okay, but I’m worried he’s putting you in the firing line. He doesn’t always practise the firebrand action he preaches. Your best option is to go along with Batley, pass your probation and get out - like I’m trying to do. And I’d take that badge off...He can’t stand to lose. He’ll get you back some other way.”

So, all along, Batley was quite aware that Evans’ oral French was a cause for concern, but had had a go at me for trying to repair the damage. No wonder he was reluctant to ask the adviser back. But I had no proof of what had been said - only Gordon’s word for it. Would the adviser comment on another colleague’s performance? Maybe I could write to him.....

Thank God! That was the last day of my first half-term. All next week - the forecast was good - I could forget that suffocating place with its smoky, sweaty smells and get some fresh air!

A Turn For The Worse

Hilary took one day off from work that week and we spent it at Bradgate Park photographing the deer and wildfowl. It was a perfectly still, mild autumn day and we took a picnic, including a couple of bottles of crisp white wine. We sat high above the main pathway amongst the golden bracken, and, thinking ourselves unobserved, enchanted by the wine and the sun, we embraced.....

I returned to school the next Monday with a heavy heart in the pouring rain. Many children were without coats and dripping wet, and, as I walked across the yard, I envisaged all the problems with wet desks, steaming, smelly bodies and damp pages. Before the holiday, one of the second year boys who was as bright as he was outspoken had asked me if I enjoyed teaching. Of course, I answered him yes, while his neighbour, embarrassed, grabbed him and told him to shut up. His question made me realise just how transparent my unhappiness at the school was. Now, as I approached the door, I heard a cry - that boy’s voice? - and lots of laughter. I had gone a few paces across the hall where knots of more sensible girls were standing in conversation, when the penny dropped and my veins froze. The word shouted had been *queer*. My secret was out. My first year class at nine o’clock, usually all ebullience, were subdued and puzzled; that second year class a wall of apprehension, dotted with knowing smirks. Up shot that boy’s hand. He

wanted to know what my little badge meant. I told him I could not go into details, but that it meant I was in *CND* which opposed Britain's possession of nuclear weapons. *Oh*, he replied, he thought it meant *something else*; he chuckled and his friend, all blushes, gave him a good clout around the head. I restored order and, with a feeling of nausea, decided to abandon my oral lesson and set exercises from that detestable book.

I stayed in my room and sat in a kind of paralysis during break and the next period when I was free. The clock ticked pitilessly on until 12 15 when the bell rang like a shriek announcing the crack of doom. My 5FR began to arrive, peering through the windows, as if into my soul.

Laura and her two mates at the back looked triumphant. Most of the others were tense, particularly the Asian boys and girls. It so happened that I had planned a lesson to do with the weather - part of my holiday unit. I had been keeping my fingers crossed that my contrast of the imperfect / perfect tense would be accepted without comment, replacing the rubbish they had been taught - if "taught" was the word to describe slavish copying from a blackboard - by Batley. But that worry receded into a distant speck when I began the lesson - in a total hush from them - with a brief revision of the perfect tense as a warm-up, in the context of **What did you do last week?* - a variant of my usual Monday morning opening - *What did you do at the weekend?* Crafty Laura had anticipated this, and, with a smirk on that moonface, shot up her hand after a while to ask **Quest-ce que VOUS avez fait la semaine dernière?*, causing her allies and a boy or two to titter. I had no choice but to brave it out, and, as calmly as I could, though with a hot face, I gave a few details about my week - and even congratulated her on her initiative in formulating a question. With a nonchalance which surprised even me, I went on to present my lesson, before setting a written exercise to consolidate the point, with a few grammar notes to copy in conclusion. Perhaps it was the clarity of the lesson which caused there to be none of the protests I had feared; more probably it was that their minds were elsewhere engaged. The relief I felt when the bell eventually sounded was indescribable.

I had half-an-hour before Kuldip and two others came for their weekly grammar crammer and went up to the staffroom to make a hot drink and eat my sandwiches. When I walked through the door all conversation stopped and was replaced by a heavy silence. With growing resentment, I strode to the kettle corner and made a coffee while the card table sat self-consciously staring at hands. A chuckle was quickly converted to a cough. Of course, it was Reecy. Finally he said, with a tremble in his voice, "Comment ça va, Monsieur?"

"Très bien merci!" I replied confidently and went to sit down.

Ted looked very miserable and when I sat by him he decided after a while to say nothing and hide behind his Guardian.

I began to wonder who had seen us at the park and how much they had seen. The bracken had given us full privacy, I was sure. Maybe the very fact of our being there together with a picnic basket, climbing the path to Old John, the folly on the hilltop, had been enough to arouse suspicion. But Hilary was not dissimilar to me - blonde and tall - and could plausibly be taken for my brother. I decided there and then to play it that way if pushed.

Gordon sauntered out and then came back in to announce that someone wanted a word with me. I followed him out and he beckoned me across to his room. He closed the door behind us.

"I've got until 1:30 - what's up?"

"You know you're the talk of the place this morning?"

"How did the staff find out?"

"Wardle."

A fifth year boy in his tutor group had hung back after registration and had been very upset. He

was Stephen, the shy one in my 5FR with no friends. (Gordon told me that he was counselling him in private about issues of gender. Stephen was worried he was homosexual).

“He likes you. He overheard one of the fifth year girls discussing you with her friends before school. Laura Lapworth. Her mother is a friend of Wardle - helps her out with swimming lessons. She happened to be at Bradgate last week.....”

“Ah, right. I was there with my brother Hilary. We’re keen photographers and the deer rut has started.”

“Your brother?”

He looked at me with those penetrating eyes and I could not maintain the pretence. It would be too cheap. I told him - frankly - about our day out.

“We are quite alike. He *could* be my brother.”

Those eyes lit up in a smile. That, he said, would be my get-out. He looked at his watch.

“I’m going to tackle Wardle in front of the other staff. You keep well clear. I’ll make her look so small she’ll want to crawl into a crack in the corner.”

I decided to allow him to speak for me and with growing relief skipped downstairs to meet Kuldip and her friends. But only she had turned up. She was more nervous than usual and I was in two minds about whether to call the class off. Two or three nosy boys were hanging around my door so I took down a poster from the wall and blu-tacked it to the window. We had been going ten minutes about past participle clauses when Mrs Hodgekinson tapped at the door and came in. When she saw me alone with Kuldip she blushed and stammered an apology.

“He wants to see you - now.”

I was free again first lesson.

“I’ll be up at two. Tell him I’m busy with a pupil.”

“He won’t be pleased.”

When she had gone Kuldip’s flimsy composure completely evaporated.

“They’re saying....you’ll get the sack, Sir.”

“No I won’t, Kuldip. Whatever you’ve been hearing, it’s all rubbish. I’m staying on for one reason. To keep my promise to you.”

Her beautiful black eyes filled with tears and she came to drape herself around me. My God! How good that felt! I unclasped her hands and told her she had better go. I watched her out - past a group of smirking boys. I strode through them and climbed the stairs to the top hall. It was nearly ten to two. It would be as well get my confrontation with Batley over and done with. Passing the staffroom, I heard raised voices and stopped.

“...*And* it was you who spread rumours about me and Sally Evans!”

“It was not!”

“”You and that poison dwarf who’s never sober!”

“How dare you!”

“And now you - and her too no doubt - are trying to get rid of one of the best young teachers we’ve ever had here with your dirty, filthy mouth!”

I entered the room and the scene froze. At a glance I took in the shabbiness of everything and the embroidered yellow motto in its wall frame - TIMELESSNESS IS NEXT TO GODLINESS - seemed to glare at me with even more venomous hypocrisy. A smoke haze was folding itself around the golden light like some obese snakey phantom. I found myself staring at Wardle in her tracksuit, at her Thatcherite blonde perm and then noticed the Daily Mail under her arm headlining another story to scare the little people. My fury with the times and with my circumstances gripped me and I shook.

“Gordon - don't bother. I don't care anymore. I am a gay man and am proud of it. I love my partner Hilary. He is kind, considerate, tolerant and sensitive....”

Reecy sniggered - possibly, let me be kind to him, in embarrassment - but it was like a red rag.

“...*ultra*-sensitive compared to you, you arrogant git! You play a game which is a public school substitute for buggery - sticking your head up another fellow's arse. What do you sing in the shower? *Arseholes are cheap today - cheaper than yesterday?* Hypocrites!”

The room held its breath and then Nila began to laugh and clap, Ted joined in and then a few others - even some at the card table end. Gordon was too astonished to speak. The bell screamed and I turned my back on them.

Batley was in a savage mood. I had expected only Roberts to be there - but Mrs Green was at his side too, pen poised at the ready over her notepad like a dirk. Red Ted's words filed through my head.

“Excuse me, Mr Batley. Before I sit down, I wish to request the presence of a friend.”

He was taken aback. I reminded him that I was within my rights - especially as it appeared to be a formal meeting.

“Very well - I will send for Mr Starkey.”

“I have no confidence in Mr Starkey. I would like Gordon Wallace to join us.”

While we sat waiting in silence, a note was brought in by the secretary. Batley's google eye was soon threatening to leave its orbit so I deduced that the note must be reporting the events in the staffroom. He passed it to Green who read it in a low murmur which slowed to an incredulous halt. The paper looked too fancy to be Reecy's so the identity of the informer looked quite certain. Gordon came in and sat down with an exercise book. Batley opened the bowling.

“A very disturbing rumour is circulating about you, Mr Bray, which I wish to scotch if at all possible -”

“It's true. I'm a gay man.”

Green eyed me up as if to say she had her suspicions all along.

“You should have had the courtesy to say so when you applied,” roared Batley.

“Why? It's a private matter - none of your business.”

“Not private now!”

“No. because Mrs Wardle and her friend Mrs Lapworth are gossips and scandalmongers. Mrs Wardle should be on the carpet - not me. She has acted in a deplorable and unprofessional manner, and I shall make an official complaint.”

“Wait a minute,” interjected Green. “you were...doing...I can't bring myself to say it...in a public park!”

“How do you know?”

“Excuse me?”

“How do you know what I was doing? Who came to tell you?”

“That is confidential.”

“Not if it applies to me! I demand to know who I am being accused by and of what I am accused.”

“I shall not allow the details to sully my lips....”

Your foul old cracked, whisky-desiccated lips. But what spites have you allowed to sully them?

“...Suffice it to say you were seen in the company of a male disappearing into the bracken. It's illegal in a public place.”

“It? Photography and picnicking *are* legal. Whoever made allegations should have the courage to

make them to my face and you should have them in writing for me to photocopy, so that I can sue that person for libel. I deny that anything improper took place.....on public view.”

“But,” said Batley “you have just told a roomful of colleagues that you are....”

“Gay.”

“I refuse to say the word...”

“Gay, gay, gay.....It’s legal. Been legal for years. Thatcher even supported the 67 bill - amazing isn’t it?”

Roberts had only been an onlooker, but now wanted to say something.

“You come across as a left-winger, fine and dandy, but it was Peter Tatchell who cost the party a seat last year in London. Split the vote. Most people still cannot stomach the idea of two men doing...can’t you understand?.....and it has no place in a school...but now you have made it public. Bloody disgrace!”

“And,” rejoined Green “you have openly accused Mr Reece of being a closet homosexual!”

Gordon and I could not help laughing.

“Of course I didn’t. I was angry - but only half-serious.....just taking the mick out of him scrumming. I’ll talk to him after and he’ll see the funny side.”

“This is no laughing matter!” cried Batley. “You are now compromised by rumour and innuendo. How can you continue to work here under those circumstances?”

“Are you saying you want my resignation?”

Green scribbled away; Batley thought over my question before saying, half to himself “I knew something was not quite right...I rue the day I appointed you.”

“And I rue the day I applied.”

Gordon held up his hand. “This is getting nobody anywhere. Maybe Pat has been a little indiscreet but it’s his word against the word of whoever has accused him. The key question now is - how does the school get out of the bind - because it is a matter for the whole school.”

“If” said Batley “you resign here and now, you could go on sick leave on full pay till the end of term”

I was shocked to hear this and I was very tempted. Then I thought of Kuldip.

“I’m not sick. I’m not guilty. I’m not going. But I am prepared to give you my word to resign at the end of the academic year, as long as you judge me on the strength of my classroom performance - nothing else - and certainly not those non-issues you have already raised - and PASS ME. You would be rid of me - and I would be rid of you - all of you.”

Here we go...who was working the thunder machine?

“That.....is.....an OUTRAGEOUS suggestion, Mr Bray. Tantamount to bribery.”

Green was scribbling this down with glee. I saw I needed to act quickly.

“Of course I’m not trying to bribe you! I’m just offering you my resignation - postponed - and asking you to judge me by the proper criteria. If my teaching deteriorates - fine. My fault - fail me. Bring the adviser in - let him see me teach. *You* come and see me teach. Give me feedback. You came to my room for five measly minutes. Please make a note of that Mrs Green.....”

Gordon was scribbling as fast as he could. I sensed I was winning. Then Batley astonished me. As if he was struggling with some other emotion besides anger, he swept his hand over his brow and said “Patrick...I know you are a very good prospect...your dedication and enthusiasm have been noted....I overhear children say how much they enjoy your lessons.....”

But there’s a *but* coming.....here it is....

“.....But this is akin to an explosion. There’s debris everywhere. How can the mess be cleared up? I had two parents phoning in the lunch-hour - wanting their children out your lessons. The

Sikh community does not, I am sure, share the same liberal sympathies as the Guardian-reading classes.”

Of course, he had scored a major point, and he knew it. He sat back in self-appreciation and gave me both barrels of his nose. Robertson’s fat face glowed with admiration for him. I studied his chins, his little eyes, the fat pockets under them, his guinea pig cheeks until he could stand my gaze no longer. Then Gordon came back with a scorcher.

“This is public because two malicious people made it so. They haven’t the guts to admit it, though. The thing to do now is not to attempt a cover-up or a lie. There is a more honourable course of action. Men like Patrick are coming out of the closet now. If you allow him to stand up in assembly and state the honest truth, and if you promise to punish any child making derogatory comments, direct or indirect, you would win my respect, the respect of most staff and I am sure the respect of most parents. We have a macho culture here and the machinations of certain members of staff poison the atmosphere. A very lovely woman was driven from this school by them. The place needs airing. A new clause needs to be inserted into the staff handbook and the pupil code of conduct. *No pupil, teacher or other staff should be discriminated against because of their race, religion or sexual orientation.*”

During this speech the other three had gaped but said nothing. What Gordon said next almost dislocated their jaws.

“If you take this honourable course of action, then I too will come out and admit that I am a gay man.”

All the shy sounds not normally audible in the high room - the distant murmur of traffic, the tapping typewriters next door, the cries from the playground, the electronic burble of the bell-control box - came to the fore. Green looked at Batley; the councillor looked at Batley. Batley gnawed at the quick of his index finger. This new bombshell seemed to have left him bereft of a reply. Green, the disappointed Head, saw her chance, leant across the desk and looked up at Gordon, her furrowed face composed of utter scorn.

“Out of the question!”

“This,” joined Roberts “is a school, not a...a...confessional! Not Hyde Park corner! God, how many more...are on the staff? I never dreamt I’d see the day....”

Gordon smiled at him - sweetly - and he looked away. Batley put his long face in the palms of his bony hands and shook it very slowly.

“The first thing to do....the key thing to do,” he murmured “ is to call an emergency staff meeting tomorrow morning before registration...”

He let his hands slip. He had rubbed his bloodless cheeks up into scarlet. Not a pretty sight.

“Mr Bray - while I speak to the staff tomorrow, you will go on yard duty - and you, Mrs Green will be there with him to deter any remarks -”

Green blew out a breath in disgust but Batley was adamant.

“I insist! If any child makes an impertinent remark, they are to be sent immediately to stand outside my door. I can only hope that this will die a natural death as the week progresses.... I shall expect only the highest professional standards from now on from you, Mr Bray, both in and out of school. That is all I have to say for the moment - I beg you all now to leave me so that I can collect my thoughts...”

The meeting broke up and I was about to leave last when Batley called me back on *another matter*.

“The copy of the letter you sent to the Director has been taken note of. I intend to let it lie on file until this matter is resolved....” His voice gave out and for a few seconds I almost felt sorry for

him. He was an indolent man and the stress of...me....was more than he could bear.

Mrs Green, joining me at 8:20 on the yard was suspiciously jovial and almost amicable. I was left in little doubt, when a gust of wind brought me her sweet breath, what was inspiring the cheer. Her grey presence, in a duffle coat pegged up slightly wrong, was enough to deter the proximity of the children and prevent the uttering of any comments I had been dreading during a largely sleepless night. At 8:35, a child asked her innocently why the bell had not yet gone and she turned on it almost savagely, telling it to run away and play. The gusting wind was obviously evaporating her good spirits. At ten to nine she could stand the chill, the noise and the waiting no longer and left me - as she put it - *to warm her bones*. Five minutes later, the bell clanged and the kids lined up obediently in form groups for me to usher them in. I could detect in a number of passing faces a desire to make a clever comment but within the silent regimentation of the school, none dared.

I had been excused registration and assembly because Batley wanted to brief me on what had been said in the staffroom. Ted had agreed to take his place as duty vicar in assembly - of what he said to the school later.....

As soon as I entered his room I was amazed to be cordially offered a coffee. This was so out of character that I refused. What was he up to? The staff meeting, he said, had been a lively one, splitting colleagues left and right straight down the middle.

“This is basically an ageing, conservative staff, as you no doubt have seen and heard for yourself. I managed, I think, to assuage the resentments created by your outburst, and many backed me up. Mrs Patel remarked on how much pressure you must have been under - *the last thing you needed on a the first Monday back, such a horrible, wet day....* Anyway, I told the staff point blank that rumours about...public indecency were unfounded. I left the person responsible...*I think* responsible, in no doubt that to repeat such a rumour, especially to a child, will be deemed gross professional misconduct and grounds for summary dismissal. I have directed the staff not to discuss the matter amongst themselves - and certainly not with pupils.” He sat back and I thanked him. He told me without a smile that he was minded to accept my offer. I would pass my probation as long as I handed him my resignation within the next few days - post-dated May 18th, the last resignation date for staff. I reminded him of the problem with parents and he sighed. Had it slipped his mind? He got to his feet carefully with a wince and went into Mrs Hodgekinson, returning with the draft of a letter.

Dear _____,

I wish you to be herewith assured that malicious rumours circulating about a certain member of staff are groundless and based on a total misreading of an innocent situation.

Your request for the withdrawal of _____ from his class is therefore refused. If you are dissatisfied with my decision, you are, of course, at liberty to enrol _____ at another school,

He passed me another letter.

Dear Mrs Lapworth,

I have been given to understand that you may be one of the sources of a most false and malicious rumour appertaining to a member of my staff. If so, and if you repeat it - or - if it can be shown that you began it, I have advised said member of staff that he has my full backing as a witness to sue you for slander, an action for which his professional association has already pledged financial support.

In addition, your association with Upperton High swimming activities would also be irrevocably severed.

I am placing a copy of this letter on file should it be required by a barrister.

Please accept my profound and sincere apologies, however, if you are not the source of said rumours,

“I have also amended this letter and sent it to a certain member of staff as a warning,” he added, as I passed it back to him.

Bloody hell! I could not believe my eyes. Into the corner of one of them a tear almost crept.....The man was almost human after all. Humbly I told him how grateful I was. He winced again before saying he wished to disabuse me of any notion that his letters were motivated by a wish to condone my conduct.

“Neither is it a vote of my personal support. You are an arrogant, headstrong young man - and in the wrong school! You should have applied into the county....to Lubington Upper where the pupils address staff by their first names - and even share toilet facilities, God help us!”

He leant across the table and drew circles on a map of the city centre. “Our numbers are falling - all these schools have empty places. One in this area will have to close, our councillor-governor is telling me. The last thing we need is a scandal. You were foolish to declare your.....what you said to the staff. It is a hostage to fortune. I am doing my best to keep a lid on it but you have provoked certain individuals who will be determined to get their own back. They are resentful, scheming people - very judgemental - who would dearly love to use this in some way to get back at me and serve their own ends. On that score, I have said enough....I have taken these measures to protect my own back as well as yours...and besides, were you to leave, I would have to timetable myself for more French lessons - which would cause me pressures I could not at present cope with due to.....a personal matter.”

He did not look well. His hand was trembly and he looked unslept. Beneath all his pompous bluster I had been allowed a glimpse of a weak individual. It was a Wizard of Oz moment..... It had taken a lot of effort, he continued, to turn the tide of indiscipline in the school.

“Our intake numbers are improving...no, I mean..the rate of decline is slowing....Things were on the up.....then this...”

He was clearly upset. With difficulty, he left his chair and went to look at the skyline of terraced house roofs and chimney stacks which gave way to the dingy creamy oblongs at the heart of the city, and, on the right, the floodlights of the football stadium. Barely audible, he told he had no more to add, and I could go.

Ted was beaming at break when he came down to my room - (I had taken his advice and chosen to give the staffroom a miss for a while.) He was pleased with his assembly address and wanted to put me in the picture.

“I started off by asking the kids to put their hands up if they were perfect - and, apart from that

clown Cassidy in 2B, nobody did....then I asked how many had done something naughty in the last few days and a lot of hands went up....then I asked had they said anything nasty about somebody they knew was untrue or couldn't prove it was true?....more hands....So then I read from the good book about Jesus and the woman about to be stoned. I finished by asking them how they would like a nasty rumour to be spread about them.....I think they got the message." Ted put his paw on my shoulder but I could not help but say it. "So you think I'm a sinner then?" His smile vanished.

"Do you think homosexual love is a sin?"

He looked abashed and lost for an answer. I told him - with a voice unintentionally quite bitter - that it was kind of him to talk of sins and stones....and then added a little too quickly "But....if attitudes are really going to change, it would be better to be honest and explicit!"

"Well, you'd be a bloody fool. He's told the staff not to mention it. That means you too. Sorry if I offended you. I meant to help."

And off he flounced. He was like one of those nice people who supported the 67 bill, well-meaning liberals who did not approve of homosexuals but who preached tolerance and sympathy for us poor lost souls. Why could straight people not understand that we did not want their sympathy? - we were not lepers! Our sympathising with *them* would, of course, be construed as absurd.

Ted came at the end of school and our embarrassed apologies crossed, so we laughed.

"Jesus has nothing to say on sexuality, Patrick. Just humanity."

He said he had told his wife Jenny about my predicament.

"She would like to meet you and cook you her chicken ratatouille in red wine. Up for it? And you could bring your....partner..."

"Thanks...but he would be much too shy."

Ted lived about a quarter of a mile from the school in a cosy enclave of Edwardian villas of two storeys with prominent eaves. The university and a huge hospital were not far away, and many had been converted into flats for the local student and nursing populations.

Ted always turned up for school in a dark suit and crisp white shirt, and his front garden was as neat, clean and well clipped as he was. But his wife was a surprise. I had expected a lady of early middle age but Jen, who met me at the door in a frilly pinafore, was matronly and grey haired. I had not given much thought to Ted's age but now I was obliged to reassess it, up from the late thirties to the forties and even beyond. He seemed to catch my thoughts and took me straight to two photographs of his twin boys in graduation attire.

"Richard and Thomas. Did the same course at Cambridge. Same result. Inseparable."

Their sideburns said early seventies. Ten years ago? Ted might be in his fifties then.

He showed me his study - more a library with a vast bookcase of political and religious works. But the true reason I had been invited in soon became apparent. In one corner there hung a dartboard onto which a picture of Margaret Thatcher, well peppered, had been clipped. I laughed as he picked up a dart and landed it straight in her mouth.

"Wanna go?"

I tried but my dart fell well short.

"Not very Christian of you, Ted."

"Nobody's perfect. Come and sit in the dining room. Smells ready..."

A delicious dinner over, quite a quantity of wine drunk, and left alone by Jenny on a signal which Ted thought I had not noticed, he began to counsel me on my options. I interrupted him

when he mentioned Batley and told him of his offer to me.

“He offered you a deal? Not like him. You know, I reckon it’s more than he can cope with...He thought he’d broken the back of the place and then you turn up.”

“He’s worried the school might close.”

“Only for his own skin, though! Closure *is* on the cards. Some staff would be only too pleased - to retire early with an enhancement. Some already have - on the job. But Batley’s only late forties. He’d be redeployed. And there he was thinking, cushy job for life.”

I asked him - a little disingenuously - which staff he meant.

“Wardle and Green for two...Paul Ladds, Stan Bennett, Geoff Larter.... Mel Wainde’s quite committed....makes out he ain’t, but he is.....but most of the bridge school and the other side of the staff room....well, wouldn’t pay ‘em in washers.”

Geoff Larter was Head of English, another Welshman, and the brains behind the team-teaching I mentioned earlier. I told Ted that I thought - and this was a bold move for me, a rookie - that a lot of children in the school were not being stretched. He rapped the table in agreement. Thus encouraged, I added “What Reecy said about the kids shocked me.”

“Oh, he only says what a load of others think!”

I mentioned a cover lesson where I had taken one of those Ladybird-copying bottom sets to my room and did a marvellous lesson in self-expression which I had witnessed in a Drama lesson while observing on teaching practice.

“The kids seemed to come to life. One of the Asian lads nearly peed himself being a frog-chicken.”

“Exactly. Loads of these kids get written off by Larter et alia because their language skills and personalities are under-developed. It’s defensive teaching and dead cushy. I know you were taking the piss out of Reece with your little speech, but it’s true. You must have noticed the bottom sets are made up of Asians and Whites from poor homes. They are linguistically deprived at home and need more stimulation, not less. And why shouldn’t they learn French? And have a chance to go on a school trip? You should hear Nila when she’s in the mood.”

He told me she had put mixed-ability teaching on the agenda for one staff meeting and had been howled down.

“No support from Management, of course. Upperton is not a comprehensive school. It’s streamed. Rigid. Seals in inequality. You must have heard Ladds go on about the “drongos” when he has bottom set. Sooner we shut, the better.”

“Surely not. Doesn’t it provide a focus for the community - the different communities, I mean?”

“Nila made a similar point. *Socialist claptrap* - yells Bennett. *And* he’s a racist - he thinks I can’t hear some of the comments he makes to that idle fatso, Hammond. I despair sometimes... The parents of those kids, the Asians, are really ambitious for them, and they get fobbed off at parents evenings with CSE and such.”

His wife popped her head round the door to say good night, and Ted took the break in our conversation as a cue to go to his agenda. He wanted to tell me about Michael - a teenage boy who had been part of his youth group at the church where he been vicar.

“He was a troubled lad. His father left home when he was small and he grew up with his mum and sisters. He was sort of delicate, if you know what I mean....He was a bit strange-looking with sharp features and not popular....with the girls or boys. Anyway, he came to me worried that he had fantasies - he called them daydreams - about a boy at school. He worried he was gay.”

“Worried?”

“Yes. He wanted to be normal, to feel normal, and the thought of gay sex horrified him. I was really at a loss how to counsel him. Was he bisexual? A hetero with a childish crush? I made the mistake of sharing my concerns with a church elder who had been a GP. A spinster. She did no more than tell him to pull himself together and keep busy rather than dwell on morbid thoughts. The lad never came again. A year or so later his mum found him hanging in his bedroom. I failed him, Pat. That’s when I left the church to teach.”

“And do you really think it’s sinful?”

“How can I be sure? How could I be sure of giving the right advice to Mike? I’m sure it’s sinful to push somebody against their own grain - but what is their true grain at fifteen? He was confused. I’m confused. But homosexual...relations just don’t feel natural.....”

“Not natural for you. But it is for me. Isn’t that the point? Mike was confused because all the messages he heard were shaming and negative. I was lucky - I knew my own mind.”

“But it isn’t *natural* - not biologically. A vagina is meant for a penis and vice versa.”

“Yes, but can I be blamed or held to be unnatural if women do not attract me? It’s not about choosing or preferring - morally or biologically - to be what I am. It would make as much sense to criticize me for not being dark-haired or small. And to be honest, I’m getting to the point of thinking that what straight people think about me - and those like me - is of no consequence.”

“But it is! It’s a straight world, Pat. They have the power to deny you your rights. I would hate this to end in tears for you. Upperton needs good staff who want the best for the kids. This should be kept away from school.”

“But I never brought it in!”

We finished the wine and I took the long walk back to my flat along the Upperton Rd, passing the school, passing colourful sari shops, jewellers, exotic groceries and eateries, pausing to wave to Maria Zarcone, the cheerful Greek girl in my 5FR, who was serving later than she should in her dad’s chippie and who always smelt of old oil and wet fish. The Divali lights were shining their blessing down in a ripple on the wet street. I turned to look back at the school which dominated all the roof tops, a colossus haloed yellow in the night sky. I envisaged it then no longer as an ogre. Maybe it was the wine, but a tear crept into my eye and I decided to love that criss-cross of streets, that hotch-potch of sights, smells and sounds, with cracked pavements and potholes, which hobbled along in a kind of harmony, and I began to see what role its school could adopt.

A False Dawn

Another bright morning. Another posh letter in my pigeon hole. I opened it with trepidation. It was an invitation from an official at County Hall, a Ms Wallbank, on behalf of the Director. I was invited to meet her the following Friday afternoon.

.....Mr Batley has been informed of your appointment and has been asked to provide cover for you.....

I had never been anywhere near County Hall and had to ask Ted for directions. It was just outside a well-to-do village four miles from the city....a huge six storey cube.

I took the lift to the top floor and found myself outside a very smart door. I knocked and was politely invited in. Behind a wide desk sat a grave woman of about forty in a black suit with an oval face and remarkable piercing eyes. In front of her lay spread my letter; behind her, through the window stretched the wild estates of Bradgate Park. The lady began affably enough, hoping

that I was enjoying my first term despite *a few problems*. She kept casting those eyes quizzically at my lapel badge, as if I was meant to deduce that it was a source of wonder or irritation to her. I sensed it was a ploy to erode my confidence and resistance. It was not long before it became clear that I had been summoned to be put firmly in my place.

“Can you really expect to walk into a school as a probationer and have things all your own way? The head of a school has a host of matters to cope with which you can scarcely imagine...”

I went to speak but she held up a well-manicured hand to stop me.

“You can have your say in a moment. I asked Mr Batley for an interim report on your progress and I have to say it is quite encouraging. But you have to understand that your passing or failing is solely a judgment for him - a seasoned professional. You should do the utmost in your power to comply with his wishes.”

Again she eyed my badge and stared longer at it than before.

“You do, of course, have the right to sport the badge of a legal organisation... but consider... Upperton High is a multi-racial school. How proper would it be for a member of staff to wear the badge of the National Front? A legal organisation, if a controversial one. CND is controversial too. The Director has received a letter from a Mr Salamacha, father of one of your pupils. Oksana.”

She passed me the letter to read. I give you the main paragraph.

Dear Director,

I am by descent Ukrainian. Millions of my people were starved to death by Stalin. Oksana's French teacher wears a CND badge in lessons. This offends me greatly because CND is really only a mouthpiece for Soviet propaganda and this should not be allowed in school.....

“But that is illogical and plain wrong! CND argues that it is immoral to target civilian populations -”

“Mr Bray! Mr Salamacha has a point of view which you cannot dismiss so easily. If he finds your badge offensive, you must allow he has a perfect right to his opinion. The easiest and most sensible thing - in yours and everyone's interest - would be to remove it. You were appointed to teach French. Teach French and leave everything else at the door.”

“Including ethics? Is that an order?”

“Of course, I cannot order you. I can only appeal to your political nous.”

“Political?”

“Political as regards relationships with colleagues and parents. Organisations are basically people. To get on well in one, you have to make friends, not enemies...”

She leant across her broad oak desk and for the first time smiled, albeit faintly.

“Why do you think I'm sitting here, in a roomy office on the top floor? Do yourself a favour. Get the right side of Mr Batley, don't be so awkward. I've met him...he responds to.....”

“Flattery?”

“You said it...Heads feel very lonely at times and like to be appreciated. Have you managed to iron over the...little error you say he made?”

“I think so.”

“Are you teaching more or less in a way you enjoy?”

“More or less.”

“Then what's the problem? Your *first* year. Keep your head down, do a decent job, don't attract

the wrong kind of attention.....and you'll be fine. *Then* you can pick and choose where you might go. You have a wonderful career in front of you.....Come and look out of my window." I went to stand next to her. She smelt delicately sweet like an apple. There was a wonderful view of nearly fifty miles of soft golden countryside and woodland.

"You're very lucky to work up here."

"I've not invited you to look at the *view*. Look at the tiny houses in the villages...and the suburbs. Thousands and thousands of ordinary folk just wanting to be left alone to get on with their quiet lives.....whereabouts do you live?"

In the distant haze I searched for a landmark, found the school and the football ground and pointed to the left of them.

"Somewhere there."

She turned and looked at me with those dark, clever eyes - they had obviously been key weapons in her struggle to the top floor - and this time the skin around them creased as she smiled generously.

"Just think about what I said."

With her sharp red nail she lifted my badge, glanced at it, and then looked at me for a final time before nodding, and then switched off her act. I took it as my cue to turn and leave. The door was half open when she gave me a parting shot, without bothering to look up from her table.

"Oh, and please give my regards to Mrs Wardle. Our husbands are on the Thornby Parva golf club committee...."

The message could not be clearer.

That evening I discussed my experience with Hilary and he told me for my own sake I ought to remove the badge. On top of everything else, he thought it was unwise to wear it. The next morning, I left the badge on the table in the hall - but the phone ringing called me back from the front door as I left. There was no-one on the other end - which I took as a omen - so put it back on.

Batley was not on good form in Monday's assembly. He seemed tired and unsure of himself. We sang the Lord of the Dance - one of those religion-unspecific hymns deemed suitable by Ted in our multi-faith school - admirably played by Gordon, and then Batley stood up to talk of Good and Bad, Black and White (which in view of the liquorish all-sorts staring up at him, seemed a little insensitive).

"So, is it a case....can we...er...." he intoned in conclusion "...is the human race...ahem.....mainly black with white spots...." (he paused so long I thought he had lost his thread)....."or is it white with black spots?"

That daft lad Cassidy shot up his hand but was ignored. The long silence seemed to declare it an unanswerable question. A few notices were read out and row by row the disconsolate school was dismissed from the hall.

At break, a whistling Reecy was in a bantering mood, but not with me. In fact, since the incident in the staffroom he had stopped taking the mick in French. He turned to Ted who seemed a little under the weather.

"Well, Teddy Boy. What do you re-ckon? Black with white spots or t'other road round? Boss didn't seem very sure of hisself this morning did he, though but? His hem-orrhoids, maybe?" Mel Waide told him to pick his cards up.

"Er.....no bid.....bloody tram tickets *again*.....Well, Ted?"

"It's a fallen world, Reecy," growled Ted, without looking up from his paper, sensing no doubt a leg-pull. "we're all sinners."

“Ah! But some are more si-nning than o-thers, are they not?”

A slight rise in volume told me he had turned his voice more in my direction. He began to whistle again and, Mel Wainde, spluttering and laughing on his tea, told him to stop it. Ted stiffened, turned a page in his paper and, still without looking up, said that when it came to sinning he was an expert.

“I know I’m going to have to limbo under the pearly gates to get in, Reecy. You too, maybe.”

“Don’t take the bait.” I said softly, realising all at once what *ditty was being whistled. But Nila, who had no idea what game Reece was playing, naively wanted to carry the discussion on. Sometimes she despaired, she said, and could not watch the news. The Brighton bombing in early October had been shocking for her.

“And now the assassination of Indira Ghandi. Awful. What is the world coming to?”

She looked at Ted. I could tell he was caught between two opinions. Margaret Wardle was dawdling towards the staffroom door, waiting to see if he would reply. At last he decided to.

“Yes,” he drawled “two world leaders...one is spared.....the other isn’t. My Boss certainly does move in mysterious ways....”

“What do you mean by that?” demanded Wardle in her sharpest tone.

“I wasn’t talking to you.....Mrs Wardle,” he snapped.

“But *I* am talking to you....”

“I don’t have to explain.”

“Well! It isn’t often *you* go short on words, Reverend Hadley.”

“No.....but I’m always ready to take lessons from you - on rhetoric....brevity even.”

“Brevity?”

“Black or white, Rev?” shouted Reecy.

Wardle, red in the face, muttering *how disgraceful*, flounced out and immediately laid into a child with a note. *This is the THIRD note in a row, you naughty girl!* Gordon rushed from his chair and slammed the door to ironic cheers.

“Well, Ted?”

Ted folded up his paper and looked at Reecy, deciding finally to play his game.

“Think of the Good Samaritan, Barry. How many good and bad people in that?”

“Er....one good, one bad?”

“Wrong. Two bad. The man of law and the priest went by on the other side.”

“Hang on,” said Paul Ladds “What about the robbers? Two or three of them?”

“You astonish me, Paul!” said Ted. “Well...tain’t looking good for the optimists - and maybe the innkeeper threw the victim out, once the Samaritan had gone. And maybe the victim was in cahoots with the robbers all along. ”

The bridge table laughed but at that moment I felt depressed beyond words. The bell shrieked.

During the day, we learnt that Mr Batley had gone home ill and might be away for quite a while. As soon as this was confirmed, I felt immense relief. The text books went back into the cupboard. I changed my lesson plan for 5FR and did intense oral revision of the perfect tense, including the weather. No-one seemed inclined to question my judgment. Batley’s letter to Laura’s mother seemed to have subdued her. She sat at the back doodling and looking glum; I decided to let her doodle on. There was probably an axe in my head too.

* An advert for Club biscuits at the time went - *if you like a lot of chocolate on your biscuit, join our club.*

That night I had such an amazing dream - of children playing together joyfully on a beach. After a while awake, trying very hard to remember and make sense of it all, it dawned on me what had brought it on. Ted had mentioned a trip abroad! My mind began to foment ideas - plausible and exciting ideas - which kept me awake until, in the end, I had to turn on my table lamp and grab a pen. A trip to France! A day trip to Boulogne. Taking the whole school. We could raise a lot of money towards it by involving the local communities....jumble sales....car washing! - in the quiet side street off the main road.....food stalls on the Upperton Rd side - on the wide pavement near Zarcone's chippie....(would he sponsor us?)ethnic foods, samosas, Bombay potatoes etc etc etc - produced by the kids in DS - and by parents!....a whole school...no, community effort....the local paper could give us publicity...maybe we could get sponsors!.....concerts of Indian dancing....a bingo night.....

Hilary stirred.

“What time is it?”

“Half three.”

“You ill?”

“No. Excited. I'm sorry.”

“So you ought to be. Get back to sleep. That bloody school.....”

I got up and went into the kitchen to make a cup of tea. Batley gone was like a dread curse lifted. I sat in our scruffy, comfy armchair and it soon returned me to a deep untroubled asleep.

My lessons fizzed like fireworks all that morning. The sun shone into my windows and I was back to my best because, for one thing, the relaxed response of the children confirmed that the horrible rumour mill had stopped turning. Reece and his allies, worse than the kids, would soon tire of their childish pranks and innuendos.

On an impulse, I asked my 2B how they would like to go to France for a day. They were electrified. But Warren Cassidy put his hand up to say it could not be done. I went over to the map and asked him out to the front.

“Okay Warren, here's London, and here are we, up here. Here's the Channel. How long do you reckon it would take to get to Dover?”

“Dover? What's Dover?”

“The port ...here in Kent....we would sail from Dover to get to France. To Boulogne...there. How long?”

He had no idea and his natural self-assurance vanished. I told him to sit back down, then got a chalk and started to write the itinerary down.

“We leave here on a coach say at midnight and get to Dover around five.....one and a half hours on the ferry...in Boulogne at around eight.....”

Up shot Warren's hand. “You made a mistake, Sir.”

“No, Warren. France is an hour ahead of us. It's 11 23 here now as I speak and 12 23 in Paris...”
(Or *Prais* as Warren was wont to write it.)

“How can France be an hour ahead of us, Sir?”

“Okay...have you got a watch Warren?”

“Yes.”

“Put it to 12 23 then.”

He did. I asked him if he felt any different and he smiled and shook his head.

“If you left the time like that, would it be lighter or darker tomorrow if you set your alarm and got up at seven - by that watch?”

He wrinkled his face and tried to work it out. His neighbour, Tom, was dying to tell me the answer.

“Darker, Sir!”

“Correct, Tom. The French prefer to get up in the dark and have daylight till later, when they can enjoy it. Make sense?...Good! Anyway, we put our watches forward as soon as we arrive in Boulogne and it’s eight.”

A few of the Asian children were nodding and smiling. They already had, no doubt, a good understanding of time zones due to their flying to India.

“Right! So here we are in Boulogne. It has a castle, old town walls you can walk on - and a fabulous beach. How many of you have been to the seaside?”

The raised hands were mainly white - and that, then and there, was the key factor in me resolving to take those terrific kids abroad. I added to the itinerary on the board - seven hours in Boulogne - shopping at the market, picnic, football and cricket on the beach, paddling in the sea...almost cruelly making them so excited that they writhed on their chairs.

“Say we leave Boulogne at three... what time do we get back to Dover if it takes an hour and a half on the ferry.”

“Half past four!” shouted Warren.

I looked around the class with a quizzical expression, as if to ask if they agreed. It was wonderful to see their faces gradually change from puzzlement to enlightenment as the truth dawned on them. Hands crept up, including a few belonging to the shy Asian girls.

“Half past three...” said Kamaljit “because, Sir, we will put time back one hour.”

Warren’s neighbour Tom laughed and grabbed him around the neck, calling him a twat. I reprimanded him good-humouredly and smiled at the laughter this had provoked. Little Chrisoula, a Greek girl who rarely said anything had kept her hand up.

“Sir...what is the ferry?”

Though some scoffed, many others were clearly glad she had asked. Warren was dying to tell everybody.

“Warren, go to the first drawer and bring me the poster of a ferry.”

.....As I held it up, another possibility as to their ignorance occurred to me.

“Can anyone tell me where we will leave the coaches when we get on the ferry?”

Warren had learnt a valuable lesson and so kept as quiet as the rest. Mahesh at the back dared for once to put up his hand, and I was delighted. The class all turned to look at him in astonishment.

“We take coach with us.....on boat, Sir?”

“Merit mark, Mahesh! The coaches drive onto the boat at the back...just here...we all get off and climb the stairs and find somewhere to sit, go shopping or buy a snack and a drink...”

Their dreamy eyes were full of these possibilities...

“...and if it’s not too windy or wet...we can go up onto the deck and look at the sea all around us for miles and miles and miles.....”

There were just two minutes till the bell and break.

“What time would we be back home?”

A forest of hands, and mouths pleading to be heard. I selected another shy one, whose dancing eyes told me she was still doing the arithmetic in her head.

“About eight, nine o’ clock?”

“Well done, Priti - merit mark for you too. Back here by around nine with all our French bread,

cheese from the market...what else might we buy?"

"Cake!"

"Jam!"

"Snails!"

They all laughed, the bell went and they scampered out to tell their friends. At such times, I knew there was no better job in the world. But a fear seized me, when I reflected on it over break, that I had raised expectations which would not be realised, although the counter-thought - that they were already travelling there in their imaginations - tempered a little the guilt I felt. The prospect of such an adventure soon had the school in its grip. I knew I had been presumptuous, rash even, but why should Margaret Wardle have exclusive rights on starting rumours?

"The kids are all on about a day in Boulogne," said Ted at lunch.

"Really?"

Other staff confirmed it. I looked pointedly at Wardle who chose to pretend she was miles away. "Just shows how stories can take off..... Somebody in 2B asked me what the point of learning French was when it was so far away. All I said was that you could leave here at midnight, have seven hours over there and be back at nine."

Nila's face lit up.

"That would be fantastic! We could book coaches and take the whole school. Next July before the holiday.....how much would it be?"

I pretended to think it over before answering "I dunno. I could phone round for quotes.....£500 per coach? Tenner a head? Pocket money around a tenner...50 francs."

"Twenty quid...a lot wouldn't be able to afford it...but they would have over twenty no.....thirty weeks till July to save up....."

I pretended again to give it some thought and then came up innocently with my fundraising ideas and Nila positively beamed.

"Brilliant! Let us put it all on the agenda for the November staff meeting."

The card table had stopped playing to listen and I looked over at Barry Reece who was smiling.

"C'est une bonne idée, Monsieur Reece?" I could not help asking.

"Oui, Monsieur," he replied. "trez bon."

I could see I was forgiven and in his bloodshot eye there gleamed something like grudging respect.

The absence of Mr Batley continued into the following week and by the Thursday it was confirmed he would be away until after Christmas, sparking all kinds of speculation as to the cause, ranging from piles, through bowel cancer to nerves. An acting head was therefore needed, and only one person fitted the bill. Barbara Green's sole rival was her fellow deputy head, Jerry Tomlinson, a tall, silver-haired, soft-spoken Southerner, an indolent man with a bad back, appointee of Owen Wells, the previous incumbent. Batley had soon learnt to bypass him in his drive to disarm the disruptive bullies in classes, for "Tommo" had no appetite for anger, real or simulated, and hated to have naughty boys sent to him almost as much as the naughty boys loved and mocked his half-hearted reprimands. Jerry would drift into the staffroom fetching tea, bringing messages and exchanging pleasantries with those, such as Ted, not inclined to despise him too much, before returning to his office to indulge his passions for crosswords, orchids and steam engines. He taught half a timetable of Maths to the lower sets quite badly, and had a reputation for losing exercise books, even whole sets. The arrival of Batley meant that naughty

boys no longer darkened his door, leaving him in irrelevant and peaceful isolation. He was the principal of Ted's retirees on the job.

So on Friday morning, Mrs Green strode into the staffroom, glasses pushed high onto her forehead showing she meant business.

"Colleagues," she began "last night I met the Chair of Governors and assured him that in the absence of Mr Batley I will do my utmost to maintain standards at Upperton and will expect my staff to do the same. This is particularly important in view of what he has divulged to me.....a motion will be put to the Education Sub-Committee....shortly...by the Tory group.....to close this school at the end of this academic year."

The news was met with a stunned silence. Not many faces betrayed emotion; Nila looked shocked, Ted wore a wry smile but Margaret Wardle and some others could not entirely suppress a smirk - nor, indeed, a quick glance at fellow smirkers. Ted's cynical theory seemed thus borne out - and I wondered to what extent Wardle's councillor husband might have an influence. Ted looked at me and winked. I felt very upset. A few weeks ago I would not have cared less, been pleased even.

Mrs Wardle's counterpart, Ian Morton, a gentle and kindly Scot - a rare visitor and contributor in the staffroom - having shyly raised his hand, was invited to speak. No-one interrupted him.

"Well I for one will cheer. These kids deserve better. No field.... a walk of half-a-mile to the reccy - with all the glass and litter. Every Monday morning I have to drive down early with a rake to clear the pitches..... No soft play area....."

Up shot Nila's hand. "Well, if the council would spend money on converting the top yard..." "Not a chance!" retorted he.

"That will do," cried Mrs Green "I would like all tutors in rooms now to meet the children. And not a word to any child about it. I would like a prompt start to assembly this morning. That will be all. Remember, careless talk costs jobs."

But the news had leaked in by another entrance and when little Warren asked me glumly if we would not be going to Boulogne after all, a surge of indignation made me reply that we would go, whatever happened.

Towards the end of fourth lesson, Mrs Hodgekinson was peering into my room and at first my heart sank, as she was normally the bearer of bad tidings. But then I remembered Batley was at home.

"Yes?" I said brightly, opening the door. She handed me a note, grimacing with a kind of sympathy, turned and went. The note froze my blood and disgusted me. How could Green send such a message not sealed in an envelope?

Dear Mr Bray,

A most alarming allegation has been made against you. You will report to me directly at the end of this lesson. I have notified Mr Wallace and requested that he be in attendance, assuming you wish him to act as your friend again,

Barbara Green, BA (Hons) Acting Head

To bring us for a moment right up to date, you know that Wonga advert which is infuriating beyond endurance? Green looked like that old woman with an unbearable expression of smugness as I sat down in Batley's vacated office. She sat in his swivel chair and looked so

pleased with herself that I would not have been a bit surprised if she had suddenly done two or three spins shouting *whee, I'm it!* Cllr Roberts sat just to her right, behind her shoulder, dressed in a patterned green and red jumper, leaning forward like a gross parrot.

"We're still waiting for Mr Wallace, Mr Bray," said she.

The sky behind her was still perfectly blue. I had often wondered how perverse it would feel to be a tragic victim on such a day...

A breathless Gordon knocked and was admitted. Mrs Green opened a drawer and smoothed out a scruffy page of graph paper as if it were a precious relic. The note was in a childish pencil scrawl, although the date 29/10 had been boldly added by an adult hand – definitely Batley's - in blue ink.

Mr Bray dint wont us to see him so he put a picter in the winder. We coud still see thow. He grabed an indian girl and kissed her so she ran out locking upsett.

"Well?" asked Green. "Any comment?"

I felt as weak as in a nightmare and could not speak. Gordon remarked that the note was not signed. He looked at me and asked if I wanted to go outside and have a word.

"You look really ill."

I shook my head and took a breath.

"Have you spoken to the girl?" I asked.

"How can I? I have no idea who she is!"

"Kuldip Kaur."

Gasps. Roberts snorted. "So you admit it! I thought you were...."

"I am. That is not what happened at all."

Gordon stared at the note. "Mr Batley must have written the date on. Two Mondays ago. Why wasn't it acted on before, when....."

The words died on his lips as he realised what must have happened. He looked straight at Green.

"You found it in his drawer ! You dug...this....out of his drawer...."

"Never you mind where it was found. It contains a very serious allegation of gross professional misconduct -"

"It's not dated and not signed. It's a piece of.....mischief and you should ignore it as Mr Batley clearly did."

"Why did he keep it then?" asked Roberts. "Maybe he forgot about it because he's so poorly."

"How old it is is hardly the point. Mr Bray has just admitted he was involved with a girl."

I told them about my extra lunch time lessons, and that normally three of four turned up.

"That was the day when the rumour about me started. Only Kuldip came, so I decided it was best to postpone it rather than be on my own with a pupil. She was upset and threw her arms round me. I was totally taken aback - but unpicked her hands and asked her to leave. The truth."

"Do you deny putting the picture in the window?" asked Green.

"No. I put it there before she came - some boys were hanging around and looking in. Kuldip has not complained, so why the fuss?"

"She might be afraid to..... You are herewith officially suspended on full pay until this matter is resolved. As of now. Mr Roberts will accompany you to your room so that you may collect belongings and then off the premises."

"Very well."

"Mrs Green," cried Gordon "this is an extraordinary step to take on the strength of such a tatty

piece of evidence which is unsubstantiated. Consider the impact on Patrick's classes. May I fetch Paul Starkey? This is such a serious matter that the union should be involved."

"You may."

Unable to bear to bear the silence and the presence of those two, I left the room. Gordon and Starkey were soon clomping up the stairs.

"This is a load of tosh," said Gordon. "You've got to stand up to her, Paul."

We went back in. Paul huffed and puffed but Green was adamant. Finally Gordon said he would like a couple of moments alone with her. She refused.

"I'm going to stand here till you agree, then."

"I'll have you removed by the caretaker."

"That would be an assault."

The councillor intervened. He did not object - he had to go *somewhere* anyway. I waited outside with Starkey who decided to fill in the silence with a lecture on the inadvisability of seeing pupils alone, to which I pretended to listen. He curtailed it however when the voices inside, though indistinct, rose to a screaming storm force. Then suddenly there was silence and I imagined Gordon with his hands around her scraggy neck. Paul Starkey, alarmed, seemed to share the thought. Finally the door creaked open..... Gordon raised his eyebrows and beckoned me in with a backward toss of his head. She looked uncomfortable and was still blotchy with anger. She had, she muttered, decided to take further advice.

"You may carry on with your duties until then. I cannot stress enough the importance of conducting yourself in a proper manner with pupils. Read your handbook. That will be all."

"That will not be all!" I retorted, provoked beyond endurance. "Why are you determined to demonise me? Have you no conscience?"

Her eyes were darting bizarrely in their sockets, reminding me of her expression that morning when we had been on duty together. Of course, she was in need of a drink. She went to reply then decided not to. Gordon took my arm and we left. Pupils were milling about on the stairs and on the top hall, waiting their turn to go for lunch. It was very noisy but the thoughts in my head were much louder.

"What did you say to change her mind?"

"Threatened to report her to County Hall for her drinking."

"You didn't!"

"I did."

After lunch, Kuldip was missing from 5FR, even though I had seen her earlier on the stairs.

When I asked where she was, Laura, revived from her torpor, was only too pleased to announce that *Greenie had got here*. Her tone of voice even suggested she knew the reason.

At the end of the lesson, which had gone badly, I sat with my head in my hands while Dora, my cleaning lady, picked her way around me. Eventually I looked up to see Green batting along through the hall, scattering girls playing netball. She came in with that expression of false joviality, glasses on forehead, both hands holding a sheath of papers, and more or less ordered Dora out. She was in the grip of a temporary euphoria. She placed the papers on my table and plonked herself down opposite which made her glasses fall onto the bridge of her nose. She began thumbing through her papers, la-la-ing under her breath, until she found what she wanted. "Ah. Here 'tis....Right, this is between you and me. I have spoken to the girl, Miss Kaur, and here is her statement."

It was her neat writing alright.

Mr Bray seemed very sad. I was worried he was going to get the sack. He's kind and I like him very much. I couldn't help putting my arms around him. He held me tight like a friend for a little while and then told me to go. So I did.

I felt relief. No mention of a kiss. An innocent, spontaneous event, one human being sympathizing with another. I leant back and almost smiled. She took the paper back, put it at the bottom of her pile, and picked up the top one.

“Ah...here ‘tis....you said - *I was taken aback - but unpicked her hands* – well, not according to Miss Kaur, you didn’t.”

“Did you ask her?”

“I didn’t want to ask a leading question. No.”

“Did she write this under duress?”

“How dare you!”

“Who else was there?”

“Her Head of House....Mrs Wardle.”

“You’ve stitched me up between you!”

She actually laughed.

“I have just spoken to our liaison officer at County Hall, Mrs Wallbank, who met you the other week....and I have put her *fully* in the picture regarding recent events, and this matter in hand. She was not *at all* pleased you omitted to tell her of another matter and has instructed me, acting for the Director, to suspend you forthwith from duty on full pay, pending the convening of a disciplinary committee of five governors, including me. You will have the right to be represented, of course, but you ought to know that both I and Mr Roberts will be seeking your dismissal. We carry a lot of weight.....”

You do, indeed you fat bastards

“..and the other three will, one of whom is a vicar, will not, I dare say, be well disposed to you.”

Desperately I began to think of a way to mention Gordon Wallace’s ultimatum to her but she had anticipated this.

“And if you think that...*stirrer*....Mr Wallace will be able to save you, don’t bank on it. He carries no weight. Mrs Wallbank is now quite aware that he too is a self-declared...you-know-whatwhich has rather taken the wind out of his sails.”

I looked around at the colourful displays I had mounted to bring France into my classroom; the opportunity to take my classes to France was fading fast.

“But what about my classes?”

“Ah! I can reassure you on that score. It was an open secret that Sally Evans, your predecessor and Mr Batley did not get on. With him off the scene, she is only too keen to return on supply *sine die*. So...”

All my hard work undermined

“...no need to concern yourself.”

“So that is that, then. You seem to have thought of everything.”

“That is not that, Mr Bray. I know your kind exist, and sometimes I feel rather sorry for you, but you have no place in proximity to children. I had a feeling about you from Day One...However, out of Christian compassion, I am prepared to offer you a way out less unpleasant to yourself. A disciplinary would be messy. People talk. The worst thing would be if a reporter got wind of it.

Any teacher involved with a girl would be front page news, but one like you? Makes me shudder.. ...County Hall agree. You just have time to meet this term’s resignation deadline. I

would be prepared to write you a decent reference for a position *outside* the county. You would have this term - I would pass you - under your belt. Your departure could be explained - oh, I don't know - by a family bereavement or something. You let me know what, I'll back you up. You would be paid until December 31st."

She rustled out another piece of paper onto which my resignation had been typed and dated.

Only my signature was required. I thought of Ted.

"Can I have an evening to think it over?"

She flared up. "Please, do not push your luck! This is a much better deal than you deserve. Now you are trying my patience - this has taken up my whole afternoon!"

Her eyes were darting and gleaming. I could only too well deduce what mental image they were fixed on.

"Now, be a good fellow, be quick about it. Sign!"

"Before I do, can I just ask why you are so bothered? The school is closing. Presumably you'll be retired early. You know I'm a good teacher. You know this Kuldip stuff is chickenfeed. Doesn't it bother you the kids will fail if Sally Evans comes back? Can't you see it doesn't matter what I am - but what I can *do*?"

"Fiddlesticks!" she cried, casting a dingy eye on my CND badge. "Your sort and such like have ruined this country. People should be taught to behave, to know their morals and their place. Just sign the paper. I have other things to attend to."

She rattled the fountain pen she had put in front of me. I got up, packed my hold-all full of my wonderful 1A's exercise books ready for marking and went to leave. She stood and blew out a sweet breath in exasperation.

"You are making a huge mistake. Do this and you will never set foot in a school again, I promise."

We eyed each other for a long time before she sniffed and looked away, arms folded. Slowly, I unpacked the books, had a quick flick-through my favourite's - little Julie Moore's - took the pen and signed.

Epilogue

Hilary was appalled.

"You should get the union involved. They can't do this to you in this day and age! This is 1984..."

"I'm suspended and I've signed my resignation. She's got it in her stack of papers...*basta*."

All my plans were scuppered and I really was at a loss. In the end, I wrote a letter to Ms Wallbank to withdraw my resignation and ask that the matter with Kuldip be properly investigated. I copied the letter to the union. Neither reply was encouraging; my resignation had been *tendered and accepted*. My autumnal depression got the better of Hilary whose work began to suffer. We decided on a trial separation. In early December, a letter stirred me from my apathy and inertia.

Dear Mr Bray,

I asked Rev Hadley to get me your address. I feel so terrible in case you left because of me. Mrs Green told me to tell the truth. I said nothing happened, I felt sorry for you and it was my fault. She made me write it down and said there was nothing to worry about. Mrs Wardle shouted at me when I cried a bit and she put the pen in my hand. When I told my dad he was mad with you

but when I said how nice you'd been to me and Karen and Mumtaz, he said you were a good teacher. Now I worry I'll fail. Mrs Evans is back. She's nice but not as good as you. We've gone back to the book again.

Kuldip

What should I reply? To arrange to see the girl was unthinkable. But I had made her a promise. In the end, I wrote this:

Dear Kuldip,

You did nothing wrong. My decision to leave had nothing to do with you. I made you a promise and mean to keep it....

Into the envelope I crammed several exercises I had prepared but not used, and *picture essays I had sent for from the Board. I told her I would mark her work every fortnight, make suggestions and provide stock phrases.

Before Christmas, I received a card from Jesus - no, not that one - my friend in Barcelona who offered me the chance to buy into a bar in Salou which his cousin was selling.....

There I made my fortune. Sometimes I wondered, walking on the beach, whether Nila had pressed ahead with her - my - plan to take the school to Boulogne. And had the school closed?

As far as Kuldip was concerned, after a couple of months her letters stopped coming to the Spanish address I had sent her.

* a series of six pictures designed to elicit a story in French of around 100 words. The first picture set the scene and required - of course - the imperfect

In 2008, at the age of 51, I returned home for Hilary's funeral. He had contracted hepatitis from a patient and a second liver transplant had failed. Afterwards, I decided to drive to the Upperton area and park up. It was an early spring day uncertain of itself. Filthy clouds were racing to stifle the sun whenever it seemed likely to gain the upper hand, the mild warmth reverting to chill whenever a sudden eclipse cued the wind to come buffeting down to pavement level. The school, red and broad-shouldered, still dominated its quarter but was now a private faith school. Pausing at the railing gate, and positioned at the very spot from where, on the other side, I had stood one wet morning staring wistfully out, I looked at my old classroom. I walked on, over the bridge spanning the railway long torn up, and saw that the floodlights of the old stadium had floated a quarter of a mile to the right to adorn a gleaming new one. On the old ground, more oblong towers had mushroomed and the scrap yard by the river had succumbed to greenery. I turned and walked back to find Ted's house. Of course, it had been converted into flats like the rest, and the beautiful garden was a square of weedy pebbles.

Along the Upperton Road itself, and in the catchment of terraced streets to left and right, surprisingly - or unsurprisingly? - not a great deal had changed. I wondered if the children had replaced their parents as tenants. On the corner, opposite the school, the branch of Barclay's was still busy, but the dental surgery next door was now a drinking club. There were some optimistic improvements to a few shop frontages, and here and there a square or oblong of new paving slabs had replaced the cracked ones; but derelict vestiges of the past were ensuring the street would never achieve perfection. There were still sari shops...jewelers.....groceries.....second-

hand furniture shops and, of course, outlets for almost every cuisine imaginable.....The old chapel where the school had eaten lunch in shifts had become a pound store.....But just past there, where the pavement widened, Zarcone's chippie, with the same shop sign, was still open. Behind the counter, face and body filled out, stood Maria. It was gone midday and, having refused the invitation to go to someone's house for a post-funeral reception, I was hungry. So I stepped in to wait my turn.

I could not resist saying "Hello Maria."

She looked at me and sadly shook her head.

"I'm Chrisoula. Maria went back to Thessaloniki.....She died in 2005.....Cancer."

I said how sorry I was. She put down her chip scoop and said she recognized my voice.

"I used to have long blonde hair. The grey beard is recent. Patrick Bray. Teacher at Upperton. Remember me?"

"My God...Mr Bray.... Didn't you teach French?"

"That's right. You were pretty good."

"Oh, I've forgotten it all....."

"Chrisoula...do you remember a very pretty girl called Kuldip Kaur? A fifth year?"

It was a hopeless question, Chrisoula being only in the second year back then. But to my joy and surprise, she said she did.

"Maria and her were friends at college!"

"*Sixth form* college?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember what she did there? Her subjects?"

"She did Maths with Maria. She used to come round and work."

"Not French?"

She did not know, but I felt sure she must have passed her O Level to get a place! A young couple came in – a white chap and an Indian girl - and gazed at the big menu on the back wall. Chrisoula picked up her scoop.

"And did you ever go on the ferry? To Boulogne?"

"No.....You want chips?"

"Yes."

"Large or small?"

"Small."

"Wrapped or unwrapped?"

"Unwrapped....."

The clouds had swallowed the sun and it was raining and gloomy when I came out. Across the road, an Indian greengrocer was covering his boxes of fruit and a woman was fighting with her umbrella. I walked a little further along, trying to revive a lost memory or two. After a few greasy chips I put the bag into a bin, turned and walked back towards my car, pausing to wave to Chrisoula; but the shop lights were on, turning the window into a mirror - so she did not see me.

THE IMPERFECT