

A lonesome road

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[I]

A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another. If one end of the bridge depends on me, then the other depends on my addressee. A word is territory shared by both. (Volosinov, 1973, p. 86)

[II]

The last time I saw you, lounging against the orange-and-blue-checked throw that covered the raggedy sofa in the council flat on Cassland Road, you explained how you were trying to help your squaddies¹ with their reading and writing. And it was me who was the English teacher.

“So how do they get into the Army if they can’t read or write? Isn’t there some sort of entry test?”

“It’s not that they can’t read or write, it’s the old story that they don’t have the confidence and they’re not going to be exposed as, you know – duff. You must see it in your classroom. That basic need to save face. So a whole load of stuff gets covered over by blagging a way through, laughing it off – classic avoidance strategies. You’d be amazed at what people can pick up by watching and copying others, knowing the drill, doing it by numbers. Then something happens that blows their cover – a letter from home about the kiddies, or some arrears that need paying, or responsibility for a new bit of kit that has to be field-ready chop-chop and they find the gen on it is all written down.”

“Then what happens?”

“Then what happens is a lot of scratching of heads and arses, and bluster – often involving large objects being kicked – and whingeing, and other pitiful squawks.”

[III]

It was Chinua’s Achebe’s daughter, talking on Radio 4, who gave me a way in. A portal. Partly to the past, and particularly to a process of production. She was recollecting how, when her father was writing *Anthills of the savannah* (1987), she would find him sitting and whispering. Sometimes talking out loud. To no one. Conversations between characters in his mind.

I hear voices too. Occasionally, not often. They are out there in everything, and they are indwelling. They visit like friends. Or they come banging on my door. I don’t always hide.

Today is such a day. What I call remembrance someday.

Oh, and the telephone too – the fawn and grey one with the numbered dial that sits on a shelf in my room. It isn’t plugged in. No, this is not one of those stories in which it unexpectedly rings and I lift the receiver to someone asking: “Whitehall

¹ Military terms have sometimes been taken from Pemberton, 2006.

1212. Please come quickly. There has been a dreadful accident.” Not our mother, but her tone – that brushed enunciation of the 1950s we now refer to simply as posh. She wasn’t posh – she was only just middle-class. Back when digital referred to fingers rather than data, I imagine her as a young signals officer listening in to radio traffic in Gibraltar, whilst translating from Spanish in her quick, clear handwriting that begets my own.

Soldiering and teaching crisscross my family – our mother even exchanged one for the other.

The phone on the shelf is identical to that which replaced the black bakelite handset (remember the curved mouthpiece?) in the hall by the front door of our grandfather’s house. And it is, I suppose, somehow connected, because I distinctly hear his voice.

“I’m not a well-educated man, you know, Malcolm. I was trouble at school – more out than in. But I came good in the end. I can raise my hat to anyone here and greet them with a level eye.”

“It took the Great War to educate me – except my war was longer. I enlisted as a territorial in 1911 – as a sapper in the Royal Engineers. Transit from old Bath Green Park station down to Salisbury. Then Morn Hill Camp outside Winchester, where the 27th Division was formed. Troopship to Le Havre, just before Christmas, 1914. 1 Wessex Field Company – the Wessex Engineers.

“The 27th broke the line at St. Eloi and pushed back the Boche. Dug in at Ypres – I still have a copy in that drawer of The Wipers’ Times. Stood down in 1916 when my service ended, married your grandmother and joined up again. Caught up with the Company in Egypt, then over to Greek Macedonia. Invited by the Prime Minister, yet despised by his Chief of Staff: “You will be driven into the sea, and you will not have time even to cry for mercy.”² So we built the Birdcage around Salonika out of barbed wire. You know the story about watering the beasts. Always makes you laugh. By God I struggled with those mules. But it was the malaria that wouldn’t let us go – for years and years afterwards. People say the war ended in 1918, yet we were up the Struma valley pursuing the Bulgars right into Serbia in 1919. A forgotten army. Couldn’t find the time or the ships to bring us home. Acting sergeant – your father’s risen so much higher.”

He pauses. For the rest of my life I recognise this soldier’s silence. This swallowing of memory.

“Two brothers short, Malcolm. Seventeen and eighteen years old. Just twice your years. So many fallen flowers in the fields.”

Maybe there is an age at which one becomes sentimental – the maturation of an unbidden sensibility that causes younger folk to regard you with concern as you turn away and fumble for a tissue to dry your eyes. Sometime in one’s forties, I guess. Early on in my case. Maybe in my time living with grandpa, I was sown with spores from some post-war experiment in collective remembering. Inexplicable feelings from within and without the territory of my own experience mushroom in the dark and burst.

[IV]

For millennia people have travelled west out of the Thames basin – along the Ridgeway, or the Great West Road, or, of course, God’s Wonderful Railway. But if

² <http://www.1914-1918.net/salonika.htm>

you journey east to London on the M4 motorway, you drive along one of most clogged arteries in Europe. In Wiltshire, the road passes north of RAF Lyneham, where Hercules aircraft wheel in to land like flying whales. Where we were brought home after your funeral some twenty years ago. Where each week now it seems another coffin draped in the Union flag is carried in slow time across the tarmac, repatriated from Iraq or Afghanistan.

Some Saturdays my friends demonstrate outside the Hippodrome against the wars. They no longer ask whether I will be joining them. I cannot confess that I want instead to wait in silence in Wootton Bassett amidst the lines of people who greet those hearses as they pass at walking pace along the road from the airbase.

I remember you telling me how all the ruperts – all the young officers fresh out of Sandhurst – relied absolutely on their sergeants.

The last time I saw you was dead on a slab in a West German morgue in full dress uniform with the stitches from the autopsy that had sectioned your trunk peeking over the ridge of your collar. This, and the rain that beat down on the gun carriage on which your comrades hauled you is what I remember when those transports land.

This bridge is to you, my brother.

[V]

I returned to the Institute of Education one week this March for a memorial to Harold Rosen, my professor of English and education. There was finger-food in the anteroom to the Jeffery Hall, which had been set out as a space for socialising. A few hundred people gathered at round tables facing a low dais on which remembrances would be made. A photograph of Harold sitting in a deckchair in his Muswell Hill garden was projected on a screen. He was angled towards us and smiling. And listening.

When the tape of his voice rang out, the years shivered and I was there again, hearing for the first time the opening of “Avrum’s overcoat” (1993), witnessing him attack the emerging signs of the assessment culture that now so stagnates our education system (1982), and, earlier still, watching him engage two black youth in a chance conversation on the street in Tottenham, and bringing them from suspicion to smiles and laughter, old East-Enders to new.

People spoke stirringly and movingly and for a while that legacy of teacher activism returned to the present. Nonetheless, at over-fifty I was still a youngster in the gathering. I was here to honour the old guard and their insistence after the war that education learned to speak the language of the people.

Two extracts from obituaries to Harold Rosen define the pedagogical relationship that some of us seek to sustain, even if it is stealthily as a resistance movement, in today’s classrooms:

Briefly put, the theory and practice that emerged at Walworth insists that the content of the curriculum that the teacher brings to the class must respect the culture and experience that the learner brings there. It sees the making of meaning in and through language as the essential act in which learners engage and which teachers help to bring about. It says that the best learning is a collaboration between teacher and learner, and between learner and learner. (John Richmond, *The Guardian*, 4 August, 2008)

It was his experience at Walworth, with its dockers’ community, that led him to encourage pupils to use their own experience to express themselves, as a basis

for broadening their knowledge and outlook. (*The Jewish Chronicle*, 10 October, 2008)

I cherish the continuity of the present tense in John Richmond's words.

[VI]

I had planned to hop off the train at Dalston Junction and walk along the Lane. A drop of touristic nostalgia before I returned to Bristol that evening. Hadn't visited the borough of Hackney – old Division 4 of the Inner London Education Authority – for a good few years, so I was keen to see how the place where I had lived and taught had changed.

As happens, I was disorientated from the start – the overland station at Dalston Junction has been re-sited at Dalston Kingsland further up the road. Half way up the escalator some calligraphic bright spark had graffitied NO WAY DOWN, 10 FOOT on the riser of one of the steps. Lovely pen strokes. Practised. Nimble.

I walked straight into Ridley Road market and the smell of saltfish, with yam like hairy chair-legs laid out in front of small stalls. A flashback to a bag of samosas had me looking, but I couldn't see the place anymore so headed out through piles of sandals and bolts of dyed fabrics, guided by some recollection of a Vietnamese restaurant down Mare Stree, where I could put a bit of fire in my belly against the chill of the day. The market petered out and the street joined up with Dalston Lane once more. I took a left towards the old front line.

I can only describe the experience as one of erasure, like taking a rubber to pencil on paper and finding the marks have gone but the indentation hasn't. The pub we would all pile down to for lunch on a Friday was a new-build office, and the infamous Sandringham Road – a half-mile gangsta empire of gun smoke, weed and general badness (according to the press of the time) – was presided over by an old lady who smiled across the road at me as she headed off to market pulling a tartan trolley. The windows of a drinking spot with a reputation for wickedness (actually good for a game of pool and a bottle of Nigerian Guinness) had been blacked out with paint – perhaps to turn it into a club, although it seemed to have closed completely. Over the railway arches, where the science block should have greeted me, loomed what looked like a furniture superstore. At least the alleyway of black Hackney cab fitters and motor mechanics remained ever as was. I knew the old school had been rebuilt and renamed as an academy and all reference to its history cleansed, but the very site seemed an inversion of its former usage – where once were buildings was now space and what had been open was filled with an impressive modernist formulation of Foucault's panoptical penitentiary (1991). Curiously, the building seemed to be giving the street the v-sign. I took the hint.

[VII]

But history has a way of troubling mirrored waters. In the vacant space where my classroom's walls once stood, I read through the eye of memory what the red poster promised:

And later I will forge simple words
which even the children can understand
words which will enter every house
like the wind

and fall like red hot embers
on our people's souls

In our land
bullets are beginning to flower (Rebelo, 1972, p. 129).

[VIII]

The very family trait that irritates the arse off me, when my father refuses to believe that his memory of the road-system in and around Bath may have shifted in the sixty-odd years since he grew up there, reformed in a minor miracle of evolution as my own stubbornly aphasic navigation system. Heading south, I ended up almost lost in the vicinity of London Fields.

Passing back under the railway, I found myself in a stretch of street – quite quiet, leading nowhere obvious, with double doors punctuating the dressed stone wall and a short flight of steps. I was admiring the early blossom on two ornamental plum trees planted in the pavement when there's a sound like a bass drum being kicked and one of the doors bulges outwards. A fierce-faced man emerges in a wheelchair. One trouser leg is pinned up. The chair barrels out of the doorway and straight down the steps, then swings into the pavement and towards me. I jump sideways, bleating some semi-indignant phrase.

The bloke looks up at me glancingly as he wheels past. Something familiar about him. Late thirties, I guess. The door crashes shut. I keep watching his back as he recedes down the street.

A cackle of raucous laughter. "Oi, Mister Reed – you always was a dozy twat!" The chair turns the corner and is away.

I am fairly put out by this comment – it's shattered my reverie of the good old days. Radical warrior of eighties' inner-city education has been demoted. Even dickhead would have been preferable. I'm already struggling for his name.

There's no prestige in being called a dozy twat. By John Dally of all people, now that his moniker returns to me. Or Dilly as he was known, since he was never the fastest... Well, you get the picture.

Wanted to be a soldier. No, wanted to be a Royal Marine. Must have attended some recruitment jolly as a teenager because he'd picked up a little of the lingo. Forever using his intended future as an excuse for slacking over this or that. "When I'm in the Corps, I won't be needing to write a poncy book review, sir." Or: "The sergeant – he served in the Falklands, down south, sir – he said as long as I knew my arse from my elbow and didn't drop a bollock in basic training, I'd be all right." The day I tried to tell him that "Corps" wasn't spelled "core" and actually came from the French for body, he just sniffed and told me I wouldn't know about these things, and anyway it had to be "core" because the Marines they was the heart of the armed services. Which was logical, if wrong. I deliberately forgot to tell him that if he ever referred to the Marines in the hearing of anyone actually in the Corps and failed to prefix it with Royal, he drop more than a bollock. Or that my old man had been the recruitment officer at Lympstone Barracks through the 1970s.

By this time I'd turned a couple of corners and emerged on Mare Street. The familiar grand stairway, the balcony over the entrance, and above the legend of Hackney Town Hall the municipal clock topped by a coat of arms and flagpole with the red, white and blue sagging against its lanyards. Rock Against Racism with Misty in Roots playing for free. Marching against police brutality, against Thatcher's

education cuts. “Hackney is the poorest borough – why should our kids have to suffer?” Chant it out.

Some protest is astir today. No placards or banners. No marshals from the SWP giving their counterparts in other revolutionary cadres the evil eye. Just a trickle of men in uniform or smart jackets and pressed chinos with a few women and children heading for the door.

Beside the stone cross to council employees who fell in the world wars, I hesitate – torn between *bánh canh* (thick noodle soup) and rising curiosity. On the bottom of the plaque, like a teacher’s comment and in exquisite lettering, is written NO WAY BACK, 10 FOOT.

[IX]

The demarcation between police and armed services was never especially discussed in the classroom, but it was definite. There may have been some difference of view between ethnic groups, but often there was consensus. The police were evil bastards who never let a chance slip to pick on you if you were black. The army was different, although it was never exactly clear how – still racist although maybe worth giving it a go if you were that sort. The RAF was good for learning a trade, although the uniform was a bit naff. Nobody mentioned the Navy, except in conjunction with The Village People.

There was always an interest in special forces, although more along the lines of self-aggrandizement through reference to American film portrayals than specific understanding of British engagement in post-colonial struggles from Aden to Zimbabwe. Despite the silent scorn of the sons and daughters of Vietnamese refugees, sewing your own wounds up in the style of Rambo offered an acceptably distanced sense of bravura, whereas US Task Force Rangers with UN Pakistani and Malaysian coalition forces dying on the streets of Mogadishu³ – especially as the realities of the situation in Somalia became the first-hand experience of classmates in the early 1990s – rather pissed on the parade.

The Falklands’ conflict of 1982 had changed the discourse entirely. Bugged down, bombarded, burned alive on battleships, yomping across mountains two nose hairs away from Antarctica and only three it seemed from the moon – and all of this in technihorror on the evening news – brought the role of commando warfare directly into people’s comprehension. If there was heroism, it was ugly bravery; if there was loyalty to Queen and country, it was at the behest of an ironclad prime minister with the eyes of a Fury. Brigadier Julian Thompson RM – a combatant Commanding Officer in that conflict (and a face from my childhood) – made it more than clear that this was a politicians’ war waged against the advice of the military⁴. A war of arrogance rather than one of need or principle.

What I remember most is the way it became impossible, despite the jingoistic attempts of the press, to demonise the enemy. It wasn’t the resolution of an enemy we witnessed in those Argentinian eyes; it was the despair of conscription. By “we” I mean British, although it was hard to revel in my nationality then; harder still to admit to being an officer’s son.

Strange that decades of British military engagement in the cities and countryside of Ireland should have become so submerged in public consciousness that it was a

³ <http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/Somalia/Somalia.htm>

⁴ If memory serves me right, this statement was made in a Channel 4 documentary, “The Falklands War” broadcast in 1992.

nasty little skirmish miles away in sheep-land that stood out. There had been troops in Ulster most of my life. I suppose for the kids I taught, there had been troops out there and pictures of them on the telly all their lives.

When your life in public is bounded by the degree of visibility of your difference, then all home streets become enemy territory. I know many kids carried that knowledge like an innate form of radar that told you where and when to turn and take another path. I know because, when I started teaching, I lived in hard-to-let council flats. I know because I learnt from the kids I taught how to listen up and listen out, to attach yourself to the edge of an event whilst making it plain that you weren't involved in the slightest, to watch with eyes down-turned like dimmed headlights.

So much of what we have seen in the sixty-odd years since the D-Day landings has involved light infantry throwing shapes in the doorways of streets and, conversely, shapes throwing missiles from doorways at men mounted on tin cans. The era of street warfare, of the urban guerrilla. The very word *guerrilla*⁵ enters the English language two hundred years ago (1809) during the Peninsular War (1807-1814), when Wellington was aided by Spanish irregulars who hounded Napoleonic occupying forces in a series of "little wars"⁶. Authorised insurrection. The action is far older than the word. As old I guess as cities. And slavery. Spartacus. The Maroon Wars. Would Arthur Lord Wellesley have connected the actions of Spanish insurrectionists with those of Africans and indigenous Caribs, who had fought the British in Jamaica almost continuously from 1655 onwards? And remained unconquered? Across the Atlantic from the Iberian peninsula lies Florida. Where, late in the Anglo-American War of 1812 to 1815, Britain abandoned what became known as the "Negro Fort" on the Apalachicola River, leaving it under the command of an African named Garson and an unknown Choctaw chief⁷. The fort attracted escaped slaves from all the neighbouring states. Returned to slavery in 1816 when the fort fell to US forces, who scalped the chief and shot Garson.

Disquiet in my disquisition. Hold on, there is no way back now. I need to make just two connections.

First. The British armed forces take significant numbers of working-class recruits from inner-city areas. And from former colonies. And from the deep British countryside. As I write, snipers are being redeployed against the Taliban and they are mainly drawn from a pool of people who can stay still in the field and know how to hunt. Or poach. Your townie knows a thing or two about territory too. The very conditions of inner-city and rural life in Britain and its erstwhile colonies foster the skills required to fight on foot in the war zones of the Twenty-First Century. On the other hand, those conditions also provide the skills for insurgency. The SAS is based in Hereford precisely because the borderlands offer both the terrain and the mindset for fighting in borderlands. Key here is the mundane experience of working-class youth – the sort of experience from which most middle-class families attempt at all costs to separate their children.

Second. This connecting of historical relations between Europe, Africa and the Caribbean, between imperialism and resistance, is precisely the kind of curriculum – no, philosophy – that we used to devise in the 1980s. And, I believe, it has all gone. The potential for our youth to experience politicised, culturally sensitive, local

⁵http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50099960?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=guerilla&first=1&max_to_show=10

⁶<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/guerrillas-in-the-mists-of-time-spain-remembers-its-war-to-end-all-wars-782561.html>

⁷<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3p1643.html>

thinking has long been spent up by the national curriculum fat cats. The algorithm of prescribed knowledge leading to universal success has only succeeded in leaving children empty-headed regarding the present, because what drove our teaching prior to the NC was not the notion that the past was another country but that the past is the foundation of the present. We are here because you were there, as another classroom poster put it.

[X]

In the late 1970s, a decade before the collapse of the Soviet Union, two slim translations of Hungarian poetry were published – János Pilinszky's *Selected poems* (1976) and Miklós Radnóti's *Forced march* (1979). A Catholic and a Jew, both poets were interned by the Nazis in prison and labour camps. Pilinszky survived. Radnóti was executed on November 9th 1944. When his body was exhumed from a mass grave the following year, a notebook of poems was found in his raincoat pocket. Listen:

But if, some wild dawn hour, you should awake to find
 Your world collapsed in ruins, and set forth like a ghost
 Leaving your few things behind you, almost naked:
 Then in your beautiful heart, made light, there starts to grow
 A mature humility, reflective, of few words;
 And when you speak rebellion, it will be disinterested –
 In hope of a free future shining from far ahead.
 ('Neither Memory, nor Magic...', Miklós Radnóti, April 30th, 1944)

Before I chose to train as a teacher of English, and before the experience of teaching in Hackney radicalised me, I began, tentatively and briefly, to enquire how experiences of the war against fascism might have altered the voices of poets in Europe, including the British. In Ted Hughes' introduction to *Selected poems*, he quotes Pilinszky (from an interview in 1969):

Should someone ask, what after all is my poetic language, in truth I should have to answer: it is some sort of lack of language, a sort of linguistic poverty. I have learned our mother-tongue from my mother's elder sister, who met with an accident, was ill, and got barely beyond the stage of childlike stammering. This is not much. No doubt the world has added this and that, completely at random, accidentally, from very different workshops. This I *received*. And because the nice thing about our mother-tongue is exactly this fact, that we receive it, we do not want to add anything to it. We would feel it detrimental to do so. It would be as if we tried to improve our origin. But in art even such a poor language – and I must say this with the pride of the poor – can be redeemed. In art the deaf can hear, the blind can see, the cripple can walk, each deficiency may become a creative force of high quality (Pilinszky, 1976, p. 8).

So in 1980 I entered teacher-training at the Institute of Education, and learnt about the dispute there between Basil Bernstein (1971) and Harold Rosen (1972) concerning the actuality of restricted and elaborated codes of spoken language. Yet I came already prepared by poetry to explore the experiential origins and aesthetic potential of people of "few words".

[XI]

I am standing at the foot of the bank of twelve stairs that lead up and into Hackney Town Hall. Indecision is spinning like a tune in my head: “Should I stay or should I go now? / If I go there will be trouble / And if I stay it will be double.”⁸

A wheelchair pulls up beside me.

He’s wearing a green beret with a golden globe and laurels cap-badge. The beret is pulled into a wedge over his left ear.

“Hey there, Mr. Reed. What you up to then? Let’s mount an assault on those stairs.”

“Still on the attack, John?”

“Remember my name then.”

“Talking of names – Dilly...”

“Alright – leave it out – I was a bit stressed. I get like that these days.”

“So, how’d you get in last time – given that we were so nicely re-introduced when you were coming out?”

“If you open your eyes, you’ll see a ramp to the right.”

“Ah. So why the bumpy exit at the back?”

Silence.

“Ain’t you gonna ask me how it happened then?”

“Well, I was walking along the street and I nearly got taken out by some rude bastard in a wheelchair – that’s how I remember it.”

“Yeah – very funny – see me laughing my leg off.”

“So how did it happen, John?”

“Don’t like to talk about it. I’m a vet, y’know.”

“Am I being punished for something in our past, John?”

“I’ve wondered the same mesself.”

“Pinter used to go to our school. He’d have enjoyed this conversation.”

“What you yapping about? I don’t remember no one called Pinter. There was Panda – so-called cos the way he spoke he could be both black or white. Mind you, kids are all like that these days.”

“Don’t go off on one, John. Please. Not just now.”

“Land mine. They dig ‘em up from round old Soviet bases like in Kandahar and re-use them against us. That was what was happening in Helmand anyway.”

“I’m sorry.”

He grunts.

“When did you get your discharge?”

“Well it was a bit pussy for a while after but the medics sorted me out.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know, Mr. Reed, I know. Got to look on the bright side...”

And he is gone.

Two people are walking up the stairs away to my right – a tall man and a youth of about sixteen, who must surely be his son. The man is resting his hand on the lad’s shoulder. They are taking the stairs carefully. Neither spares me a glance.

When the door swings shut after them I decide to follow.

Exactly central in the stairway is written in small but familiar lettering RISE UP. And the number ten beside a single outline of a footprint.

⁸ The Clash. (1981). “Should I stay or should I go”, *Combat Rock*, Epic.
http://www.lyricsfreak.com/c/clash/should+i+stay+or+should+i+go_20031789.html

[XII]

BBC Ten O’Clock News, Monday 9 March 2009⁹. Harry Patch, 110, the last surviving British veteran of the Great War has been made an Officer of the Legion d’Honneur by the French government.

BBC Somerset reporter: What does this award mean to you, Harry?
Harry Patch: Memories.
 [Long pause]
 Bad memories.

[XIII]

The meeting room is packed, so I edge my way in and lean against the back wall. It looks like there have been speeches given at a mike-stand at the front. Now people are waiting to speak to officials seated behind temporary tables. The mood is restless and resigned. There is restrained anger on the faces of people waiting, and impassivity, with a rigidity that suggests fear, on the countenances of the bureaucrats.

I turn to the lad next to me and ask politely, “Could you tell me what’s going on here, please?”

“If you don’t know, you shouldn’t be here.”

There’s a sharp intake of breath and his father says, “No need for rudeness, son. He was only asking you a question.” And looks me in the face.

We know each other. He turns his body towards me, stiffly. There is grey in his face, and it is tired and thin, where I remember it full and softly gleaming brown.

“Mr. Reed. How are you doing, sir?”

“Mr. Scott – what a surprise – so good to see you. And call me Malcolm, please. It’s a long time since we were in school.”

“Sergeant Scott, actually,” the lad informs me. “My father is in the Royal Marines.”

I look at the pride in his eyes and the way they hold me, level to level.

“It means something, you know. He had to earn that rank.”

“Thank you,” I reply. “I know.”

“Do you? Do you really know, Malcolm?”

“Let me introduce you to my son, G. You see already how he’s grown facety!”

“Well, feisty more like. I don’t have a problem with it. Nice to make your acquaintance, G.”

“It’s Gad, actually. Only friends and family call me G.”

“One of the twelve tribes of Israel?”

“True – and one of the Ten Lost Tribes.”

“I didn’t know about them.”

“Well, people will find out. What is lost shall be found. The writing’s on the wall.”

His father is listening to this and smiling.

“He is so much your son, Carlton. He is like I remember you. Direct. Knows his own mind.”

“Well, I suppose so. Have to thank his mother too. And you know her. Mary Clairmont?”

⁹ ‘WW1 Veteran Receives French Award’ – video of interview with Harry Patch at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/somerset/7931817.stm>

“He knows Mum?”

“Lower Sixth A Level English. 1989. The boys’ school and the girls’ school combined. At the end of that academic year, I left for Bristol.”

“And I left too. Maybe I should’ve stayed but Michael – you remember Michael – he was making it in the building trade and the money was so good, and my mum couldn’t really support me on her own, so... Mary stayed, though. And did well in English.”

“Mary was always going to do well. And she got you, and Gad, so she’s a lucky woman.”

Gad snorts. “He talks about you, does my dad.”

“Come on then, tell me the worst – let’s get it over with!”

“Always about having your own opinion. Talking about things in class. The kind of books you read. We never do that in our school.” He looks at his father. “Go on – you tell it. You were only saying it the other day – how you don’t understand the way I’m being taught just to think the way the teachers think. ‘Spoon-feeding my mind like it’s a baby. Everything chewed up and broken down in advance so there was nothing to get your teeth into,’ was what you said.”

“I just remember how when you taught us, you wouldn’t tell us the answer. You’d go, ‘Well, Gary, what do you think? Give us an opinion.’ And Gary would go, ‘I don’t have an opinion, sir.’ Because he usually got away with that in some other classes. And you’d go, ‘Well, we’ll wait here until you do, Gary, because the idea that you of all people haven’t an angle on this is plainly absurd. We value your opinion.’ So Gary looks around to see who’s listening and says, ‘Alright, so this is what I think...’ And then you’d go, ‘Right Carlton, has he examined the evidence correctly? Is there another way of looking at this?’ At which point, Kevin would lose it and start shouting at you, ‘Sir, sir – just tell us the answer. I haven’t got time for this. I really haven’t. You’re the teacher, you should know the answer, so JUST TELL US IT!’ And you would completely blank him by saying, ‘Just listen to Carlton, Kevin, and try writing down what he says and you’ll have one answer. But it won’t be yours.’ And Wai-Hung would say, ‘No, it won’t be your OWN OPINION, Kevin.’”

Gad laughs. “Do the story about Kevin and the board.”

I say, “I don’t remember anything particular about the board.”

“The leather jacket and the board – you don’t remember that? You wouldn’t get away with teaching in a biker’s jacket and jeans these days.”

“What’s it got to do with Kevin?”

“Right, well you used to do these one-off lessons if there was something important happening, like the battle between the police and the miners at Orgreave, or when the council first let on it was going to demolish the high-rise blocks down in Clapton estate. Sometimes you’d buy all the papers for that day. Then we’d compare how different papers had written about the same event or issue. We’d do group work then feed back to you on the board. You would always set the board up with two sides. On one side you’d put up different quotations, like for instance how the *Mirror* described the miners, how the *Sun* did it, and the *Mail*, and usually the *Times* and the *Guardian*. Then we would have to pick out the differences in language and point of view and summarise them for you on the other board. And we would copy this down in our books as we went along.”

“Yeah, that was before the days of whiteboards and pens – everything in chalk on the blackboard.”

“Exactly. That’s the point – Kevin usually waited to see whether it was going to be important before he’d copy anything down, because he was just idle, that boy. And

you would finish writing up and then go out and check what we were doing and give Kevin an earful for not taking notes and then go and stand by the board, and we'd start the discussion. And Kevin would copy the side you weren't blocking, but he'd never bothered to write down the quotes on the first board. You'd be conducting the talk in your usual way, and you'd lean back against the board. In your leather jacket. Usually things got quite opinionated, which was your intention, and you'd do your listening face, and directing people to have their turn. And Kevin would get more and more desperate to see the board behind you, but he couldn't say anything. Then, finally, you'd stand up straight and the discussion part would be over. And then Kevin would moan and start cussing you under his breath, because there'd be a big chalky mess on the back of your jacket and nothing but smudge in the middle of the board."

Carlton stops. Suddenly he isn't smiling, and his face is ashen. He nudges Gad's arm and props himself up against the wall. "Could you find me a chair or something, please son?" Gad shoots off into the corridor.

"Are you OK? Is there anything I can do?"

"Just stand next to me. Let me hold on to your shoulder if it gets bad. It will pass. All things must pass." His fingers dig in above my collar bone. He breathes in, holds it there with clenched jaw, and slowly exhales. Then his left hand lowers and starts to massage the muscle on the top of his thigh.

"I'll tell you whilst he's gone. It's better that way.

"We were patrolling on foot, approaching a village in the open. We had no intelligence there were any combatants around. Thought we had flushed this area, so we were doing the hearts and minds stuff. I took a round in this thigh – shattered the femur.

"I fell backwards and twisted, so I was lying on my leg and looking back at the village under my right armpit, fingers in the dust. The lads were returning fire around me. Corp Kelly radioing for back up – air strike.

"Never knew I knew the words that came, but there they were:

Like one that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turn'd round, walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.

"Coleridge, 'The rime of the Ancient Mariner'. My last year at school.

"Words waiting out there until it was time, until the meaning could come home.

"And I'd never walked in fear or dread. Until that moment.

"And now I have walked on.

"And I know that frightful fiend."

And his fingers knead away at his leg.

[XIV]

Sergeant Scott sits, straight-backed. Gad gently argues his father into swallowing some painkillers, then disappears again. The security guard who has brought the chair suggests that he knows the official at the desk in front of us and could speed the process up. The response is withering: "There are other people here who have waited longer than we and I will wait my turn. Thank you for your concern."

He turns to me. "Look around you, Malcolm – all the people you see here have

in some way served this country. I call waiting and worrying and looking after the kids on your own serving this country. Funny thing is – and it is no laughing matter at all – once you have served this country, often it forgets to serve you. These people have needs. The pay you receive for putting your life at risk will not support your family comfortably. I did not go to sleep at night in Bosnia or Afghanistan secure in the knowledge that my son grows up in safe and respectable housing. It is frowned upon if my wife earns more than I do. I belonged to a peace-keeping force, but I did not have peace of mind.

“And sometimes when we serve we suffer. There are scars to the body, but scars to the mind we can often only see in people’s behaviour. Time closes like new skin over these things that happen to us, but still we feel the itch, and however hard we scratch it never eases. The drink and the drugs don’t heal those wounds.

“It helps if you know how to talk, Malcolm – this is why I am telling you this. It helps if you know someone may listen. And even if they don’t, you can still weigh up the evidence, read the angles, make your own notes, form your own opinion, go out and argue your case. And then that bootneck resistance to whatever the weather can throw at you will come into its own.

“My wife jokes with me that I never worry when our son goes gadabout on the mean streets at night, but the first mention from school about how he must do this and ought to do that, and I am flapping about how what he really needs is to be allowed to stand on his own feet and walk tall.”

Gad returns. It is time to leave.

I’m about to say my goodbyes when I make the mistake of mentioning Dilly.

“You didn’t happen to serve with John Dally, did you? He was a few years above you. I bumped into him outside – he almost ran me down in his wheelchair. Wearing his green beret, all smartly pulled down to the left. Lost his leg to a landmine in Helmand, so he said.”

They both look at me, shocked.

“You really can be a dozy twat sometimes,” mutters Carlton. “The beret should have given it away – always slopes the right.

“John Dally fell off a church roof robbing lead – that’s how he came to lose his leg. Total fantasist. Wouldn’t have lasted ten minutes in the Corps.”

[XV]

On the way out, there is a sign on the corridor wall that requests us to walk on the left. Black lettering on a white background. Except someone has carefully blanked out the last three words and replaced them in identical lettering with three more.

WALK 10 FOOT TALL.

In memory of Lt. P. E. Reed, RA. (1963-1986)

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