

# **The Titans**

by Alex Burrett

(Fiction for grown-ups)

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Dedicated to Morgan, Mitchell, Gorse, Scarlett and Lauren.

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# THE BEGINNING

"Edward has recently arrived in the village. He will be sitting at your table. I want you to make him welcome – let him join in your games."

Those were the words, well almost the words, Miss Arks used to accompany Eddy as she thrust him into my life. They were his accompaniment. Miss Arks was the only person I have ever heard call him Edward. Even his parents called him Eddy.

I was eight then – the oldest at the table. I know I was the oldest there because the subject arose every October – the month of my birthday. Big Joe and Richard had their birthdays after January.

The three of us had been together for over three years – since the first day of infants. By the time Eddy appeared we were all juniors. More importantly, by the time Eddy arrived, we were all Titans.

I remember exactly what he looked like that day. He had short and spiky hair – like kids that lived in cities. He had round cheeks with freckles and sticky-out ears. His eyes. His eyes were green, deep green like a row of beech trees in mid-spring. But he was not a Titan. And as much as we respected Miss Arks and her intentions, being told to let Eddy join in with us and actually letting him were two very different concepts.

Big Joe, Richard and I had spent the summer holiday, the one between being third year infants and first year juniors, discussing. It may be hard to picture three seven year-olds spending their summer holiday discussing – but discuss is what we did. Well, we spent a lot of the available time talking. Whenever we were together, we debated.

If you are sceptical, we were sufficiently well motivated and we had enough time in conference during that period to reach conclusions. It was our aim to find answers. And because they were what we wanted, we developed our own way of getting to them. To find answers we 'fact sorted'. 'Fact sorting' involved using what we had been taught to discover what we had not. It demanded a state of mind that questioned everything – even the facts it was based on. Fortunately, most of the facts we used were reliable – the basic building blocks of understanding. The answers we sought towered above. Real whys, hard answers – work!

At school we were taught to ask questions – not how to solve problems for ourselves. School taught us that every answer could be found somewhere – written in a book or stored in a teacher's mind. At the age of seven I knew such a claim was ridiculous.

Our lessons were based on the three 'r's – reading, writing and arithmetic. There was also time to 'p' – play but no time for real 'l' – learning. Educators are concerned with the standard of children's grammar – their ability to follow rules. They make sure the next generation can multiply and assume parents will teach them obedience. Unfortunately most parents fail to educate their children about the real world. And generally teachers do not teach us how to deal with society either. At school we are taught how to use money and check the change – we are not told what to do if we find a ten pound note in Woolworths. We are expected to wash our hands before dinner – we are not given guidance about what to do with them between meals. There are always exceptions. Miss Arks was an exception – but this is not her story, it is mine.

To create the Titans, we started with one fact – a simple fact. Three sevens are twenty-one.

Times-tables were one of the most important elements of our education during the infant years – and they were usually mastered by the end of them. I say usually because there are always exceptions. Our trio had an exception in this case. I will let you discover which one of us was the slowest. You may already be able to guess correctly who that was – and all you know so far is names. (Mine is Axel by the way.)

Please, please do not think that the names I use are clichés. Names often adapt to fit character's personalities. Some may argue that an amount of a person's nature is derived from their name – an unusual name can cause a child to be alienated by peers. Often names just seem to suit characters perfectly. Occasionally names are so powerful that they influence language itself. The Marquis de Sade, the pillaging Vandals and General Molotov (with his fiery little cocktail), have all added wonderful colour to our language.

Personally I hate clichés. I apologise now if too many materialise as I tell my story. I hope they do not. It will disappoint me if they do. There were three of us. We were each seven years old. Therefore, we had (between us) enough experience to make a twenty-one year-old person – a man. We decided that if we shared our knowledge and ideas we could each have the outlook of a twenty-one year-old. Collectively we could come of age.

The desire to be 'grown-up' is not at all unusual. What made us different to other kids was we had discovered how to change want into reality. We were alchemists of desire. We found a way to achieve premature manhood. We made ourselves men.

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# BIG JOE

He was big. Is that a bad way to start? Does size mean anything?

No and yes. Big can mean a lot of things. Size is important. Let me explain.

The average seven or eight year-old perceives a lot more big things than the average forty year-old. To me then, towns were big. Now I know it is cities that are big. To Eddy, when he arrived at Hill Village, the bump that the school rested half way up probably seemed big. I knew bigger hills, ones with roads so steep you had to push your bike up them. Compared to the school's little mountain, Big Joe was small. Compared to all the other first year juniors, Big Joe was big.

When he was a first year infant he was the tallest of all the infants – first, second and third years. We had a height chart on the wall in the assembly room and that fact stood there for all to see. A line above all others (juniors were above drawing lines) had Joe written next to it. For three years his name was placed at the top of the chart. This dimension of Joe's earned him some respect. Physical size always does that.

As I am trying to describe him to you, I must add another dimension. Build. I will add shape to your image of Big Joe. He was strong. That is as much as I can really remember.

It always surprises me how witnesses help police produce photo-fits or artist's impressions of perpetrators months after crimes have been committed. Perhaps all criminals look the same and it is only their skin colours and amount of hair that distinguishes one from another. Or perhaps we notice a person's features more vividly when we have met them during stressful circumstances. Perhaps stress turns the brain into a camera. That may be true because I can still see Eddy's face quite clearly when I close my eyes and review my past. Sometimes I see it at other times too.

Personally I tend to remember notions rather than details. This form of memory can also be useful. Big Joe was strong. He may not have been able to pull a train with his teeth but, as far as I was concerned then, he was strong.

His father was a farmer. Big Joe was his son and heir. Starting from the day he learnt, or rather was trained, how to walk, big Joe embarked upon a transformation. He changed from being his Dad's son to his employee. At the age of seven he was about eighty percent of the way there. Older onlookers may have disagreed with my fraction. That is because adults love to look down at children, pour scorn on their perceptions, belittle them.

Big Joe's father was a prime example of that adult attitude. He hardly appreciated his son's efforts. After all, a seven year-old is not the most effective piece of farm equipment. Big Joe saw things from a different perspective. As far as he was concerned, a large part of his life's energy was dedicated to farmwork. So, unappreciated help given to a busy parent was the arduous labour that shaped a son – no story there!

To a Titan, education was a springboard – a device that the recipient could use to leap forward into discovery: Darwin's Beagle, Newton's apple, an acid tab. The Titans used knowledge and the Titans was our means to escape from the narrow-minded thinking that imprisoned us.

To most of the teachers at Hill, education was something that turned the ignorant into the hopeful. They wanted to give us the opportunity to succeed. They

saw each piece of knowledge they gave us as a brick. When we collected enough of these bricks we would be able to build our own future home. If we collected extra bricks we could build extensions, swimming pools, conservatories.

I think education is the process of being shown how to explain what we already know. It is about being taught how to utilise the theories that academics have decided to use to describe every phenomena. The more we learn, the less individual we become.

Learning is about falling in with accepted theories, compromising. The wise compromise, agree, unify. The uneducated stand out, do things their own ways, are imprisoned. If knowledge is the key to the world, it opens only one door. It lets you into an orderly metropolis, one of reason and logic. If you fail to cross the threshold you are an outcast, unwanted and undesirable – an outsider.

People who strive to discover truths try to find answers to their own questions. To do so they create ways of answering and therefore create their own solutions. Big Joe had his solutions. In an attempt to become a more efficient machine, and therefore be rewarded with some affection from his father, he developed both physically and mentally. His body built muscle and stronger bones as it reacted to demands placed on it. His mind formulated the theory that the quickest route between two points is a direct line.

Roman road builders had displayed knowledge of this fact over two thousand years before Big Joe recreated it – proving we are capable of far more than what we are taught. But even the mighty legions displayed only an interpretation of this mathematical truth. They respected the great god Topography. Big Joe didn't. His interpretation of this principle dictated going through things.

If he had to be on the other side of an area of boggy ground, he'd walk through it rather than go around it. If he had to collect the eggs from the chickens in the morning, as he often did, it was quicker for him to walk through the clucking hens than try to avoid them. Consequently, if he had to cross the playground, he would not bother to try and weave his way through other playground users. Within a few months of arriving at Hill School, Big Joe's locomotion reputation preceded him. The majority of children chose to move out of the way of his reputation rather than wait for the physical realisation of the Big Joe moving myth.

Before I continue, I want you to know that Big Joe was not nasty, not even bad. Titans abhorred cruelty. There was no evil in any of the Titans in the beginning – in the days before Eddy arrived. Big Joe was simply a realist. The genocide of his father's stock did not bother him. At certain times he was called on to get involved. He was expected to help out when the chickens were being killed. His job was to take a just-throat-cut chicken from his Grandfather's experienced left hand (that trusty, sharp pocket knife being in his right) and shake it.

We have all heard stories about chickens being able to run after their heads have been cut off. Well, if you are holding them by their legs, they cannot. Trapped by a firm grip around the lower limbs, the upper ones move instead. For a seven year-old arm, even Big Joe's, this flapping can cause quite a remarkable effect. A few consecutive powerful beats can change a limp-necked chicken into an elaborate fairground helium-filled balloon. A firm grip of the legs is necessary to stop a mortified creature from escaping for a final frolic in the yard.



For Big Joe, the captor, this struggle would become a competition between a dead bird trying to fly and him trying to shake the blood out of its flustering body. The blood must be drained to make the flesh palatable. This is done by swinging the chicken in vertical circles from an extended arm. Following Newton's third law of motion (the one about equal and opposite reaction) the blood flies out of the chicken's severed neck.

Big Joe always rose to the fight and he would see success in streaks of blood appearing on the tarnished wall in front of him. A splatter with every revolution – each bloody revolution.

You know a little bit about Big Joe now. He was big, strong and capable – but not cruel. He was, by the way, the one who struggled for a long time with his times tables. He was not stupid, no-one is. His brain had other concerns – practical problems. For him, lists of numbers were just too far removed from reality to be worthy of worry.

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**RICHARD**

The village was not very large. I could say it was small – but that would sound wrong – give the wrong impression. Hill village was all about not being big. It had one church and one war memorial. It had a village hall with en suite swings and a tennis court. It did have two shops – but one of them was also the only garage and petrol station. The other shop, the one where sweets were sold in white conical paper bags, is closed now. Its floor, where small fidgety feet once gathered, has been carpeted. At half three this afternoon the front room of Bell Cottage will be empty. Two armchairs and a sofa have replaced the jumble of thoughtful faces which used to flood in at that time. This more distinguished room has to wait until later now to be filled with noise. At six pm the current owners go in and switch on the television.

Because the village was not big, people knew a lot about each other. This fact is particularly important in my story. I knew Richard. I knew his family. I knew what made him – David. David made Richard. The bad news for all DNA devotees is David was not Richard's father – he was his brother. David was five years older than Richard and a committed bully. Unlike adult bullies who justify their violence with a lust for power and money, David attacked Richard without reason. Other observers might have interpreted the situation differently – the Titans did not!

Under this continual oppression Richard developed marvellous talents. He formed an ability to see into the future. This talent arose from the necessity to know when David was going to launch an attack. If David came into a room intent on aggression, Richard would know when it was going to occur, from what direction David would assault and what weapons he would draw. Good boxers develop the same skill. They anticipate the next punch by watching their opponents fidgeting and reading the look in their eyes. Richard might not have been a hard puncher, but he showed an understanding of his enemy that Montgomery and Rommel would have envied.

The Titans were not interested in fighting – but Richard's prophetic awareness was a useful attribute. He could operate as a lookout without having to go to the trouble of looking. He could sense oncoming danger before the personification of it arrived on the scene. And if we did get caught out, he could instantly find the perfect hiding place – that ability never failed.

Richard was slightly built. The David-inspired nervousness that he suffered meant that every bit of food he ate was converted into twitches, side steps and sudden leaps. He was useless at heavy work – but he could move! He could move cleverly. And like the Grand Masters of martial arts in China, he had discovered how to use an attacker's strength against himself. On the occasions when David did grab him, Richard would move quickly in another direction and cause his elder brother to plunge to the floor or collide with a wall. And his getaway speed was unrivalled. For three years in a row he was the fastest in our year at the school sports day – the best sprinter. I had three green second place rosettes to be proud of. Eddy changed that order. I have no idea what made Eddy so fast.

Richard had one more useful characteristic. He possessed a huge amount of factual information. When he and his brother were not fighting they must have talked. Richard was privileged with the wonderful opportunity of being able to access the knowledge of a Second Year at Street Comprehensive.

The divide between the caste of Hill School pupils and the tribe from Street Comprehensive was immense. There was more between us than age. Going to the 'Comp' was both feared and desired – a not too uncommon pairing of emotions. Even though Street Comprehensive was only eight miles away, it was going to take the Titans four years to get there. Four long years. Fantastic tales about Comp life percolated their way to our remote village school. When they arrived they were horrific: First Years get their heads flushed down toilets; a peculiar punishment called detention is dealt out for talking in class; after every school disco there are mass fights.

Richard got the truth first hand. More importantly, via David, he learnt physics, chemistry, biology, personal relationships, how to play rugby and about wars (history). To make you realise the importance to the Titans of having such knowledge available, I must liken it to that of Robert Scott's South Pole expedition being given skidoos, satellite navigation equipment, Gortex clothing and Royal Marines' arctic rations. Useful.

Although the Titans were interested in more than acquiring knowledge, the factual information Richard supplied was always used. We wanted to create our own society. We aimed to set ourselves apart from all the despair and destruction that was going on in the news. We wanted to avoid making the mistakes our parents were making. To achieve this we took the knowledge that was available and used it to help construct our own philosophies. Richard helped, Richard was a gatherer. He provided the technical information we needed, suggested possible outcomes of our actions and, because he knew so much, stood as legal adviser to our team.

The Titans sorted the information he offered. If we had blindly accepted it, we would have made the same mistakes as the shortsighted adults around us. But we had vision – so we considered its relevance to our beliefs and then decided to what extent we would include it in our credo. We were not slaves to flawed collected wisdom, I made sure of that. I understood then, as now, the advantage of being aware of different ways of thinking without necessarily adopting them.

I have described Richard – not physically imposing but nimble and knowledgeable. His ability to predict helped us – as it would help any organisation. His supply of accurate information backed up the Titans in the same way that good civil servants support a government.

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**ME**

Every group has its leader. Anarchy will never work. Leaders always evolve.

The leader. Some people have given holders of this vital position a bad name. But a great many leaders have been good – Gandhi, J.F.K., Julius Caesar. There have been evil ones too. This can be explained. Our society is made up of all sorts of people – good and bad. Sometimes leaders will come from the latter group. And our society is an aggressive one. This means that leaders can stay in power by intimidating and eliminating the opposition – Hitler did this on ‘The Night of the Long Knives’, Stalin did it during ‘The Purges’.

I accepted Eddy’s takeover of the Titans. I allowed him to take my position. At the age of eight I displayed a quality that many great men and women in history have failed to maintain – an understanding of the masses. I never lost my awareness of what was best for the majority. When I realised they wanted another leader I did not stand in the way.

I understood Big Joe and Richard. I understood a lot of the inhabitants in Hill village. I knew a great deal about what was going on inside Hill’s homes. I could see through the walls that tried to shield families from inhospitable weather and prying eyes. I was no juvenile gossip. I never spread rumours or watched others through a telescope kept in my bedroom. I had, and still have, a gift. I have always been able to look at things and understand them. This talent of mine is particularly powerful when the object of my interest is a human being. Historians look at the past and explain why things happened, why we are in the situation we find ourselves in today. I look at people and know what has made them into what they are.

My story has barely begun and already I can see how you might be sceptical of the things I say. It is not difficult to explain why lots of people are reluctant to accept what they are told. We are naturally cynical. If the Loch Ness monster has been seen by a couple of hundred people, it has not been seen by many hundreds of thousands of others. The greater number is believed – we are convinced by statistics. This principle applies equally well to the notion of having a gift. For every gifted child there are thousands who are not. And those who have a particular gift may still disbelieve those of others.

I have no idea how many people have my gift. But, if you are burdened with the same ability as me, you will accept everything I say. The millions (I am also an optimist) who are not so fortunate, have the hardest task – they will have to *try* and believe me.

The Titans was my idea. I wanted to pass my awareness of life onto others. It seems a recurrent trait throughout human history that the few with special abilities and insights have tried to share them with the many who do not. Unfortunately, due to the inability of the masses to comprehend what is on offer, the giver often suffers. I was aware of that fact at the beginning and I decided, before the Titans was formed, that I was not going to end up being the target of a jealous crowd.

Big Joe and Richard were ideal Titans. They were innocent and needed my knowledge to prepare themselves for life in the big wide world – the one even beyond Street Comprehensive. Eddy was not and did not.

Perhaps I have given a little too much away already. That name I keep mentioning, the ‘E’ word. I keep using it, it keeps slipping into *my* story. I am not

trying to tease you. I see you as an equal. You may be my intellectual superior or inferior – that is of no importance. I will treat you with respect – you have bothered to follow me this far, so I will repay you by telling it as it happened. I want you to have the benefit of studying the unusual series of events that I encountered. The reason I keep talking about Eddy is that he became so entwined in my life at the time – as you will find out. I want you to know everything. I refuse to hide the truth.

Eddy is also the one person I have never managed to understand. He evades me. I can only describe his actions and their consequences. Well, everyone has their Achilles' heel – even Achilles did! When you discover what happened, perhaps you will form an opinion of Eddy. I am trying to understand him myself as I retell my story.

Eddy was a chaotic element hurled into my stable life. Eddy was the piranha put into my goldfish bowl. A better comparison would be to liken him to the myxomatosis-carrying rabbit that brought its disease to the warren in the wood near Big Joe's father's farm. But that allegory fails on two counts. It fails because I knew where Eddy came from but no-one knows where that rabbit came from. And it fails because I have no idea what Eddy was infected with.

Back to me. This is after all my story! You must want to know what I am like. I am similar to Jesus Christ.

Christ's teachings were wonderful. Like Miss Arks he believed in sharing. She would only let us eat a sweet in class if we were willing to offer one to everyone. (She made an exception for cough sweets because health is too important an issue to get mixed-up with politics.) Incidentally, Miss Arks was probably responsible for the sale of more cough sweets at Five Bells Store than any cold virus. Perhaps Mr and Mr Roberts gave her a percentage of the profits earned from their sale.

Jesus did more than preach. He did things. That is where the main similarity between us lies. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. He showed them that he was no better than them. He was their servant, their friend and their leader. He physically removed the dirt from their tired feet. He did not just talk about respecting his followers, he demonstrated it. Eventually we are all remembered for what we have done, not what we have said. We all know Jesus cured the sick but we cannot be sure of his exact words. Jesus fortified his teachings with demonstrations: he calmed waters; he fed thousands; he predicted the future and he rose from the dead. Words are never enough. Jesus served human kind.

The motto of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst is 'Serve to Lead'. The Prince of Wales proclaims 'Ich Dien' (I serve) on every two pence piece. British Airways paint 'Fly to serve' on their planes. I agree. To be responsible for others implies looking after them. I picked up that pearl of wisdom long before I heard of those great British institutions. I discovered it for myself by experiencing what my parents did not do.

My mother and father were responsible for me – unless I was signed over to Miss Arks for a school trip. They were to blame for my arrival in this world. They should have accepted their responsibility towards me and taught me about life, prepared me for it. I should have benefited from their knowledge and experience. They saw things differently. I stood in the way of their easy-running lives. I was a

major interruption in my Mother's career. And although I only caused a minor hiccup in my Father's professional existence, I remained to him a hungry parasite – feeding on his hard-earned resources. I did not block his intestines but I did stand in the way of his freedom.

I did not starve. My physical well-being was catered for and my parents made sure I was aware of it. I was made to feel guilty for all my good fortune. Every mouthful of food I took from them prodded at my tender conscience as it was bustled towards my grateful stomach. My parents kept me alive but they did not tend to any of my other needs.

They demonstrated how not to do things though. They punished me. They taught me not to leave food on my plate and not to get caught doing wrong. They did not teach me how to choose between right and wrong. If I made a mistake I found out about it. But they never provided answers to my questions – so I formed my own. I did things. I was a doer! 'Lead by example' is a motto I have never forgotten. I still believe in it.

Big Joe was capable of doing things but needed guidance. Richard was too heavily influenced by avoidance to be any good at getting things done. He was better at looking-out, out on the edge somewhere, not too involved. Getting involved never bothered me. I formed the Titans. I knew my fellow Titans – understood them. I led and served the Titans. I was the oldest. I would make plans and ensure they were executed. I was the head executive – and I would execute our policies. I was a Titan, I was *the* Titans.

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# THE TITANS

The Titans is an organisation that exists to allow people to be more aware of the world, act in a mature manner and prepare themselves for the future.

A member of the Titans will be known as a Titan and must never forget that fact. A Titan will always be able to benefit from the knowledge, support and philosophy of the group.

Being a Titan requires total commitment. Membership is not limited to the original three members but only certain types will be able to belong.

The founding members are Richard Davies, Joseph Parks and Axel Williams. The principles of the Titans are:

1. Always act in a mature, confident and intelligent manner when making a decision.
2. Provide help and support to any other Titan in times of need (whenever possible).
3. Be brave in the face of danger. (There are lots of solutions to any one problem and fear is merely a reaction to the unknown.)

The Titans will meet (as often as is possible) every Sunday at ten in the morning. The purpose of each meeting will be to discuss the principles listed above, form official reactions to events concerning the above and continually adapt the theories to keep the Titans up to date.

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**EDDY**

Eddy had green eyes. I know that I have already said that – and it may not seem important. It was important to me. I was from the countryside, brought up on spring water like wild daffodils and primroses – and my eyes are blue. They are a dull blue, the same colour as dirty blocks of flats and faded aerosol scrawls in pissy subways. He came from a city and his were green, the fresh living green of youthful plants.

It was wrong. His eyes sparkled with the beauty of nature that my eyes should possess. My eyes have let me down – they are flat, two-dimensional. He was more fortunate. His eyes had the depth of springtime fields stretching all the way to the Black Mountains on a clear April morning. I do not normally notice the colour of people's eyes. I noticed Eddy's immediately. And on our very first meeting I was jealous.

Jealousy is a horrible sin. I know that. But knowing is not always enough. We cannot always behave how we know we should. Jealousy can make the mind act illogically, disgracefully, violently. But I did not let it eat into me. I refused to let that emotion become a ghostly rat that slept under my blanket and gnawed nightly at my conscience. I controlled it. I made sure that my jealousy remained inanimate – I denied it independent existence. But it was there. It was a seed that I would not water, an egg I would not keep warm, a maggot I would not feed.

As I think now of that seemingly insignificant subject, eye colour, that flicker of jealousy is materialising again. Perhaps it is a microscopic organism that resides in my adrenal gland. That theory would explain the physical effects I experience when I think about Eddy. My heart beats faster, my face feels cold and I can sense my blood filling up my muscles ready for flight – or a fight! Please let me get my breath back. I am getting a little carried away. I am sorry.

This story is important to me. I want to get it right, tell it as it happened. It is hard to do that considering the position I am in now. I must. I will.

Eddy – short-haired, jug-eared, cheeky-freckly-faced and green eyes. City-boy. But the most significant of his vital characteristics was that he could fit in. He could adapt to his surroundings because he had no outstanding aspects to his personality. He was bland, perfectly malleable. He was not weak-willed, just unobtrusive. He was a sociological chameleon, a shape-changer, a turncoat with a magical coat that could take on any form.

Eddy could be the perfect Titan at our Sunday meetings, the perfect son when he returned home for tea and then the model disciple of Miss Arks first thing on a Monday morning. I realise now that he was classless too. He possessed the classlessness of international idealism. A man like him, twenty years older, would make the perfect politician:

He would have breakfast in a brown-stained transport cafe and talk with truckers about trucking. Then he would change from jeans and T-shirt into smart casuals and chair a lunchtime meeting in a two-star hotel. (The debate might be on fox hunting.) In the evening he would arrive in black tie at the local Hunt Ball and mumble about breeding and bloody nuisances. You get ten out of ten if you think he was a con man.

He did not seem to have evolved from any group and he could exist happily in any. He knew how to adopt the customs of a sect – and when he had learnt its ways he would appear to have been raised on them.

He soon became a Titan, the fourth one. I cannot remember how long it took him to become a member. Time dissolves facts. Facts are like a penny coin dropped into hydrochloric acid. The longer the penny is left in, the less of it remains. Eventually there is nothing but sludge. Sludge does not buy sweets.

When did he become a Titan? I refuse to dredge through dates to find a precise answer. Perhaps Eddy was a Titan from his very first day at Hill School. We might have let him into our gang that very first playtime. After all, the whole school did respect Miss Ark's ideas. Exactly when is not important now. He became a Titan and he was definitely a Titan before Christmas because the barn dance took place before then.

Eddy was older than me. His birthday took place on the seventeenth of September.

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# THE BARN DANCE

If you have never been to a barn dance – go to one. They are informal and fun. You have to dance with people you do not know – and others you would normally avoid dancing with. I see these gatherings now as lively social occasions where friendships can be made and bettered. When I was eight they meant something else.

The barn dance in my story was at Big Joe's father's farm. We knew Big Joe would be forced into helping his old man all day – so Eddy, Richard and I went to help with the preparations. It was Saturday. Adults in the village always arranged events on Saturdays because they had to run, organise and patronise them. Nobody could spare weekdays and Sundays were normally reserved for private affairs.

Big Joe's Dad set up the bar. He linked up the gas bottles and beer barrels, arranged the glasses for easy collection and sampled the wares several times to check everything was correct. Big Joe's job was to shunt bales of straw. We helped him with his burden.

Big Joe could sling the dusty chunks of dead plants around like an Olympic hammer thrower hurls his hammer. Eddy, Richard and I, however, needed to work in pairs. For Big Joe this meant that the weight he had to carry was cut in half – he had to make up the second pair. For his father the result was much less desirable. His work force (and therefore food bill) was quadrupled but its performance was only doubled. He would grumble something to that effect each time he passed us.

The string cuts into your hands when you carry bales of straw. It does not cut them enough to cause bleeding, the twine is too thick. It just causes pain. Our palms went red after ten minutes work and then stayed that way all day.

Straw is bedding material for livestock. It is tough, durable stuff. Bales of it are like huge collections of second-hand plastic drinking straws tied together to be sent for recycling. There are differences though. The bales of straw that we were dealing with were dusty, dirty yellow and smelt of stale bread. And although bales of straw might look like giant Lego bricks from a distance, they are not so easy to handle. Sharp, broken stalks stick out in all directions – each one hoping to cause a tiny, itchy scratch.

We wore T-shirts and received the same sorts of injuries that a juggler would receive if he juggled with holly wreaths and used his forearms to catch and toss them.

After five or ten minutes working we would forget about the pain. After about thirty minutes we would start playing and running around. Joe's mum understood children. She would call us into the house every hour or so for a drink of squash and, if we were lucky, a biscuit or two. This system continued all day with a break for lunch. We would work for half an hour, play for as long, and then be invited into the farmhouse for refreshments. With all our interruptions, we probably did as much work between us that day as Big Joe could have done on his own in a morning. The difference was Big Joe's happiness. He was having fun. That was important to his mother. His father just cared about work getting done. So all day we were on edge – afraid of getting caught doing nothing. But we managed to avoid annoying him too much by staying sufficiently out of sight. His preoccupation with setting up the bar helped us considerably.

By teatime we had finished furnishing the barn for the dance: bales of straw for seats; a stage for the musicians made from bales of straw; a bar based on bales; bales to keep the crowds from unwanted places and a couple of bales ripped apart and scattered all over the 'car park' in case it rained. After we had eaten there were about two hours left before the chaos began. We ran outside.

"Why don't we build a den from bales – just for us, the Titans?" – Big Joe.

He was as bale-infatuated as his father.

"It won't be a den. It'll be a meeting house." – Me.

Big Joe tended to forget that we had to act maturely. He would often get over-excited when we got together. It was hardly surprising with a slave-driving father like his. We gave him his freedom. Left alone with his family, the desire to have fun was forced to give way to labour. My simple correction reminded everyone of the Titans' principles.

"Good idea Axel, let's do it then." – Eddy.

Looking back I can see why Eddy supported me – it was a complicated operation and he would be around to blame me if anything went wrong. Eddy was a politician. He was the sort of politician who would do anything to get to the top. He knew how to get there too.

All the materials for building were at hand. We decided to build our senate in the barn where the hay and straw was stored. The barn was huge and there was bound to be room within it to make an adequate fortress. And having the building materials at hand meant our castle could be built without shifting many more bales of straw. We had done enough of that.

Also, not having to carry the bales out of the barn meant that Big Joe's dad was less likely to see us and tell us off – or, even worse, find us "some work to do". Mr Parks had already suffered a whole day of occasionally catching his labourers wasting energy. If he saw us looking unemployed in the last two hours before his dance, we would definitely have been called upon to shift a pile of something. That is another reason why Big Joe suggested an activity which would keep us out of his father's way – he wanted some time off.

We stood next to the barn, a huddle of architects staring at the eroded walls of processed grasses towering above us. Big Joe's dad had hung lines of coloured bulbs around the farmyard and barns. We made the most of the light to carry out our inspection of the multi-coloured barn.

"We have plenty of time before the do starts. We should plan exactly what we want to make before anyone starts shifting any bales around." – Me.

"I agree." – Eddy.

"All right. Sit down and I'll ask each person, in turn, what they feel the meeting place should have. When everyone has given their opinion to me, I will produce a plan of action. My final plan will try to include as much as possible of what each one of you puts forward. That is, of course, unless two or more points clash with each other. If that is the case, I will decide which point is the best – or the most relevant – and use that one. Afterwards, each one of you, in turn, will be given the opportunity to question the plan and suggest any changes. Does everybody agree with that plan? Eddy?" – Me.

"Yes"



"Big Joe?"

"Yes"

"Richard"

"Yes"

This direct questioning of each Titan was a process we always went through (unless there was not enough time or only one answer). It meant that support for a plan was indisputable. There is no better way to embark on an operation than with the knowledge that every participant is happy with it.

"It should be big. And well built – in case of an attack or something. We should have some extra bits where we can put things – y’know not just one square room. There should be one main entrance that can be blocked. And the bales to block it should stand by the side so they can be dropped and seal the entrance. We will need torches. My dad has two large ones in the milking shed – I can get them no problem. There must be some holes in the walls to watch out for intruders, but they mustn’t be too big. If they are, other kids will be able to crawl through them. We need to put a roof on it to stop invaders climbing in over the top." – Big Joe.

"Windows aren’t necessary. We will hear any would-be impostors as they approach – they’ll probably be talking. More likely shouting and laughing. There needs to be an extra door as an escape route. And it needs to be quite wide. If attackers do get inside then we’ll need to escape quickly! It could have two entrances the same size, that way we’re not narrowing down our options. If they are both blockable then one doesn’t need to be any smaller than the other. We could then use both freely until the need arises to shut one off. We do need a roof. Otherwise there’s no point in building it, anybody could just climb up the sides and jump in. Or people could watch us if they crawled up to the top of the stack. The room should be round so that nobody will feel stuck in a corner or left out or get trapped if we get outnumbered. It will make it simple to light too, if the room is completely round – especially with only two torches. One could be put on either side facing towards the middle." – Richard.

"It does need to be well-built. There is always a chance that we may get attacked and we must be prepared for that. The size should depend on what suitable holes we can find in the stack. If one looks big enough there won’t be any need for lots of shifting. Two entrances is good. The shape isn’t important. When we get building we can leave a narrow gap between some of the bales rather than push them tight together. That way we can see out and the strength of the walls won’t be weakened much. That’s my opinion. What do you reckon Axel?" – Eddy.

"All right. It doesn’t need a roof. It will be far too hard to build, we’d have to get wood to hold the bales up – or make it completely out of other stuff. And we’d have to go and find all that and carry it here, and Mr Parks might catch us and then we’d be in trouble! Anyway, it might collapse in or something. And it would mean that what little light is about will be cut out. And we’d all feel penned in and no-one wants that I’m sure. The Titans is all about freedom. We’re free to do what we want and this is meant to be a place for us to enjoy – not feel afraid in. So, I propose Big Joe goes and gets the torches and then we find a suitable place and we get

building. The walls should be as high as we can get them – for privacy. And two shuttable entrances is a good idea. OK Eddy?" – Me.

"Yes"

"Big Joe?"

"Yeh"

"Richard?"

"OK"

We began.

The barn was originally stocked-up with absolute precision. The chunks of straw and hay had been stacked by the hands of ten generations of Parkses. Big Joe's dad's hands genetically inherited the ability to efficiently stock a barn with any objects. He could do it as exactly as a forensic scientist matches up DNA samples from a suspect's blood with those from traces of sperm found inside his victim's vagina. It is not difficult, therefore, to see how Joe with his size and bale-shifting instincts, could do as much work as the other three Titans put together. He would have helped his father initially fill the barn so that there was not enough space left for a cat to make a home. Not even an orphan kitten.

Emptying a barn of its damp-fearing packages of dried vegetation is a totally different process. It is the opposite. It is completely random. There is only *one* successful method of stuffing bales of hay and straw into a man-made steel-skeletoned shell. That way is so perfect that they interlock precisely enough to defy scientific laws about structures and centres of gravity. There is no figure yet written that can quantify the number of possible combinations by which such a pile can be torn apart. Only words can describe how that happens. By the time we surveyed our foundation, the part-emptied state of our barn was something like this:

More at one side than the other, sort of diagonally up from the corner nearest the pig sheds but a bit from both ends as well, but mostly from the side nearest the five-bar gate which leads to the calf sheds through the pasture fields where we had taken bales from for the dance, and also quite a lot from the top few layers where the trailer is stacked from before going out.

Relieving a barn of its crowded residents is one hundred percent personal expression. It relies on the chaotic nature of a few peoples' minds rather than the agreed working practises that Society has created to protect her daunted children. Where the next hole appears in the commune of mutually supporting parcels of sun-bleached fields is impossible to predict. Why Mr Parks walks to one place to collect a bale for the horses can depend upon, where he came from, what he is wearing on his feet, which way the wind is blowing, whether or not it is raining (continue the list if you like).

There is no one way to undo the perfect construction. There is no solution, no answer. There is no method because one is not needed. We create solutions only when we need them. There are no universal answers to be found anywhere. We create problems for ourselves and fabricate suitable ways of solving them. There needs to be a best way to stock an empty barn – efficiency demands it. Efficiency does not get involved when stockpiles are depleted. Chance takes over.

Chaos does not fight order. Disorder naturally exists when order is not necessary. We create a stable world to give it some meaning. We like to find answers to problems that arise during this process. We create meanings because we like to have a purpose – but we also let chance coexist in this self-fashioned existence. Chance makes life interesting:

The surprise visit from old friends. The win on a local raffle. The delivery man leaving next door's flowers with you because they are out. The not knowing what colour slippers you will get for Christmas. These things are fun.

The trouble with chance and the unexpected is they also the ingredients for disaster. Excitement and Terror are siblings, identical twins. Meeting either is just as likely. Please excuse my opinionated ramblings. All I wanted to say was that the barn had been part-emptied by needy stomachs, shitty floors and the needs of the dance. The result was a surreal landscape of ninety-degree angles and cubist corners – a panorama crafted initially by vicious blades and eventually by indecisive, unguided hands.

Enough pieces of that once solid structure had been taken away from the sides and top to give us an opportunity to search for a site to develop. We clambered torch lit amongst the dry, dusty terrain until I decided where our temporary headquarters would be situated. There was a huge bite taken out of the side nearest the barn being used for the dance. This hole probably marked the point where Joe's dad found it easiest to reverse the tractor trailer to – and we had made it a little larger during the day. Bales had been removed from this spot in two layers. This resulted in a mini plateau being formed which was about twelve feet wide and eight feet deep and stood back above a larger cleared area. It was ideal. It was perfect – and slightly lit by the generous bulbs nearby. That light would help us a little while we constructed. Also, if we did get attacked by a too-powerful foe, I suggested sanctuary could rapidly be found amongst the crowds next door.

We built a modest mansion. The twelve-foot gap at the front was walled four bales high with a small sealable entrance/exit at each end. These doorways were only one bale high and half a bale wide. This meant that they were difficult to use – but impossible to storm. We left a few very small gaps in the main defensive structure – just to keep everyone happy. Objectively, this did make the wall look a little false – but the most logical structures are not always the best received. All the other bales in the barn were crushed together as tightly as football crowds squeezing through the turnstile at an important fixture. The ones in our wall were a local crowd at an unimportant game. But it was dark – and who would be wandering around at night to spot the difference anyway?

We soon had a rectangular meeting place with three solid walls and one less solid wall. The floor was about four feet above the level of the larger clearing beneath. When we finished our wall, we presented the enemy with a sheer face of straw about nine feet high. The only way in was through two small holes four feet above the ground – and access could be denied to those.

We were impressed with ourselves and ceremoniously dropped a couple of bouncing bales in from above – to make furniture. To Big Joe's horror, and in a fit of proud rebellion, we ripped them apart like lions chewing up the bodies of defenceless Christians in a Roman amphitheatre. He was livid but we convinced

him that his father would never know it was us – and bales were always getting undone – and they could still be used anyway.

By the time we had finished, cars started to arrive. Or perhaps it was only once we had sat down to rest that we began noticing them outside. The music had certainly not begun. It never did until the grown-ups had absorbed enough beer and wine to encourage them to play – to lose their inhibitions and overcome the embarrassment of enjoying themselves.

We, the Titans, just wanted to talk. Richard had got a problem. David had been getting some trouble at school from a bully a year older than him. The word 'bully' is almost a joke to people who have never been victimised by one. A lot of people think that bullying is just a growing-up problem. It is not.

David received abuse and passed it on to his younger brother. Just as a conducting strip on a church steeple protects the building from a certain amount of damage during a storm, David saved himself from psychological stress by assaulting his brother. The blows were passed on. But unlike the copper strip that immediately (well at the speed of light) transfers the impact of the bolt to the ground, David held onto his destructive energy for a while. And aggression behaves like a badger caught in a snare – the longer it is trapped, the more vicious it gets. David's absorbed nastiness festered inside him until he got the opportunity to release it on his younger brother. Richard had been getting a hard time off his brother for several weeks.

The next thing I can remember is Richard sobbing. Tears were all over his face, running over his quivering cheeks like ladybirds escaping from a matchbox. His whole face was wet and red. His skin looked sore – like that of a baby's bottom when a wet nappy has been left on for too long. Richard was strong. Strong. Strong enough to stay sitting with us as he described his sufferings. He sat on his bale segment – a lamenting mother, a grief stricken father, a boy.

"We'll do something about it. It'll be OK Rich. Don't let it get you down. It's all right Rich." – Eddy.

Eddy was definitely trying to take over the gang. That was the moment at which I first realised it. Those too-soon words of encouragement to Richard. False, empty words – not mine.

It is a strange phenomenon, people wanting to be the heads of organisations – especially when there are no financial or similar benefits on offer. Logically it is better not to be in charge. That way you face less problems, encounter less stress. But people still strive to take command. Some become politicians despite the fact that they have the ability to make more money in the business world. Why do others have to interfere when there are already capable leaders making decisions? Big Joe and Richard were happy to follow me. Eddy was not.

It seems to me that there are some individuals placed on his earth in order to create conflict. There are characters dotted around this globe who behave like halves of the critical mass of Uranium 235. On their own they are quite stable, but they react explosively when they meet their match. Although they are extremely few in number, humankind being what they are, wandering souls, such meetings do occasionally occur. The bringing together of these specific individuals devastates the situation of normality that otherwise exists. And it is from meetings

of this sort that history is created and the future set. If you look back in time you will see that human history grows from the seeds sown when such lives converge. The seed can be good or bad. The good ones have some bad in them though, and the opposite is also true. But, without these occurrences, there would be no events of any distinguishable nature. There would be no history, nothing to talk about – no point in the existence of humankind. No progress.

Mathematically it was very unlikely that Eddy and I would ever meet – he came from a long way away. But he came to Hill School. We met.

So, there we were, the Titans. One quarter was letting his frustration pour out of his tear ducts and the other three were creating the friendly atmosphere that enabled him to. Half of Richard's tears made it to the straw and, for a while, stalk skeletons were rejuvenated to their once tender self. The remainder either soaked into the jumper he had put on during teatime or were given release into the music-filled dry night air by the heat from his red cheeks, leaving a salty stain on his soft flesh.

By the time Richard's tale had been told, the barn dance was in full swing and we were thirsty.

"I'll go and get a bottle of coke from my dad." – Big Joe.

He went. There were probably several reasons why he volunteered to go, but Big Joe was not in the habit of explaining his motives – not even to himself. Joe had been taught to act on instinct – so that was what he did.

Silence.

Richard recovered. Eddy and I sat apart, still. An air of rivalry filled the confined space. At that point, I was the Titans leader. He wanted to be it. He was impatient for change. I resisted because I knew it was not needed. He knew that too. He was waiting for the right moment. We both knew that.

Big Joe returned quite quickly. He had a plastic bottle of cola – the cheap stuff. We knew no difference then. To us it was the drink of the Gods. Little did we know that it was the drink of adults who could not see the point of paying more for a brand that promised eternal youth.

In the age-old tradition, like in cowboy films, the bottle was passed around. We were young enough and excited enough to leave the top unwiped as it moved from one pair of small aching hands to the next. We were in heaven, together. A place to be proud of, enough light (just) – and something to feast on.

Our heaven was not eternal. If the real one is, then it must be the only place for souls to go to. If there is another place, something nasty could escape there, get into heaven and shatter everlasting joy. Whatever barrier has been created to keep two places separate, given an eternity, someone or something will breach it. All that separated our haven from the outside was a single wall made from bales of straw – not the most impenetrable material. We were no safer than a naïve little pig.

The attack was not launched against the wall. It came from above. Three girls in party clothing came bursting through the roof that was not there. They were led by Lucy. Her parents were divorced and she had a stepfather. With her, following her, led by her, were two 'easily led' types – Kerry and Alison.

Not a word was needed to coordinate our defence. Action was immediate. Big Joe took Alison. She was strong. At that age girls can sometimes match boys for strength. I went for Lucy. She was, after all, my opposite number. The other two grabbed Kerry. We overpowered them easily. But they were in the wrong place. They were inside our domain.

Eddy took the initiative and left the fight to prepare one of the entrances. He moved an obstructive bale and revealed a hole – giving us a passage to force the intruders out of.

But the struggle between Lucy and I had evolved into something else. I had her in a corner of our prison and I was sitting on her legs and I had her arms pinned to the floor. Her shirt was almost completely unbuttoned. Her skirt had become naturally uplifted by the scuffle and she was wearing it like a cummerbund. And she seemed entirely untroubled by the switch of purpose. Somehow my desire to know became stronger than my desire to fight. I let go of her arms and pulled her knickers down to half way between where they were meant to be and her knees. She did not fight. She lay there and let it happen. I slid my hands up her thighs and touched her all over. What I found there was warm and clammy. It was nice to touch – more pleasing to the hands than playing with soft clay or stroking Tiger, our cat.

My first sexual experience was ended by interference from others. It was not as if I had planned to do anything more than touch, but I wish it had lasted longer. Kerry and Alison had been ejected so Big Joe and Eddy came to my aid. I did not want their help. I got it.

Struggling again as the fight restarted, Lucy was pushed out of the exit that had been revealed in our wall. A young body and a soft landing meant that only her pride was damaged. That was her problem. The girls gone, the trial began.

"You didn't help Axel. You weren't trying to get Lucy out. It was my idea to open one of the doors. You did nothing. Joe and Rich and me had to do all the work. I said we needed a roof and you wouldn't listen. They just came in through the top. Why didn't you help? You are supposed to be in charge aren't you? You did nothing." – Eddy.

That was the turning point. Eddy, Joe and Richard became mutinous Titans because they felt their leader had deserted them. A new leader emerged. I could have fought them all to show my superiority, but we were trapped in a pit and the odds were against me. They probably wanted to fight, to give me a revenge beating for not fulfilling my duty. Punishment. The location was ideal for a fight and we were all still overdosing on adrenalin. I did not want blood to be spilt. It would have meant the end of the Titans – for me at least! I took the other option. I sat down with my back against the wall I had retreated to.

"Let's talk." – Me.

I meant 'please don't beat me up' and I hoped they thought I meant 'sorry'. I was not sorry. I was more than happy with my reaction to the invasion. I was the first of us to have touched a girl's fanny. I had enjoyed myself.

They all sat down. My plea worked.

"I'm going to the dance, there's no point waiting around for them to come back. And it just isn't the same now that they've been inside." – Richard.

"OK Rich. I agree, but first let's sort out what went wrong." – Eddy.

"Yes Eddy. Axel didn't fight for us, did he?" – Big Joe.

"That's not all Joe. If you want to be in charge, you should act like it. Lead by example." – Eddy.

"Look Eddy. What's to say I was wrong? Perhaps it may have been a good idea to let the girls stay. I bet you've never even been near a girl – are you afraid of them? And it was Big Joe's fault that they found us. They must've followed him when he brought the coke here. Or they heard Richard crying like a baby. And it wasn't practical to build a roof – you know that. And I don't care if they come back. We can decide now what to do if they do. And what's the point of leaving? We can still have fun here. And I can do what I want anyway. I don't have to do what you all do." – Me.

There was a pause. It was one of those pauses during which you can see the air tumbling in front of you, and you can hear your own pulse, and taste your own spit, and feel your own breath being pushed out of your nose and trickling over your top lip.

"Well, perhaps you are no longer the best man for the job then Axel." – Eddy.

My internal organs fell from their proper place onto my bladder.

"What job?" – Me.

I knew what he meant. And I was annoyed at myself for asking. I was his ventriloquist dummy – saying the words he wanted me to. My rambling, uncontrolled speech had set him up. He had moved into the ideal position and was prepared for the coup de grace, his coup d'état. He had hovered while I stumbled backwards and forwards, waiting for the perfect moment to plunge and finish me off. His evil green eyes turned red in the artificial light as he stared through my flesh into my petrified soul.

"The man in charge of the Titans Axel. You know what I mean. Let's go." – Eddy.

That was it. The great investiture speech – "Let's go". It had taken thousands of words to bring about the Titans, Eddy took over with two. He was swift and clinical.

I had to follow. I wanted to remain a Titan. I wanted to be in control again – but to do that I knew I would have to come from within the organisation. And I knew that it would take time.

The advantage of being at the bottom is that the pressure is off. You can apply your thoughts to devising a plan of succession. When you are at the top, a great deal of your effort goes into running things efficiently. You get distracted by detail and administration. Eventually you forget about the possibility of an attack. Your defence drops. Eddy knew the perfect opportunity to depose a leader comes eventually. I had just learnt it.

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# CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY



Leaders must be strong. All great leaders have been strong. But the strength of one sometimes causes the suffering of others. That is a price worth paying. If the strong did not take control there would be chaos. In a world without control, a lot more people would get hurt, killed before their time. Look at what happened in Britain after the Romans left. All across Europe in fact. The Dark Ages. Or, on a smaller scale, communities living in police 'no go' areas run by mafia gangs. I would rather be protected by the laws of a democratic nation than rules made up by murderers and blackmailers. It is the responsibility of people who have the ability to take tight control to do so. If they consider themselves to be the most suitable, most qualified or most gifted to be in a position of authority – then they must strive to fulfil their destiny. That is their duty. That is their purpose. That is their mission. To do nothing is to support evil.

Eddy was strong. He was capable. Strong and capable. He was clever too. He was strong, capable and clever. But he was not the right person for the job. He would never understand Joe and Richard as well as I did. He did not belong there, in the village. He did not deserve to be in charge of the Titans. He could even have benefited from my leadership. I could have taught him about the village, about people. I had to take back my position as their leader – but that would take some time. I would have to plan everything beforehand, and the timing would have to be perfect. I needed to approach it from a psychological perspective – regain control in such a way that my leadership would never again come into question and Eddy's would become totally beyond consideration.

Eddy got it right at the barn dance. He probably expected us to make a den before we even arrived at Joe's. If he did not, his plan to take over was sprung into action the second Joe suggested we build one. I half expected us to build a den rather than run about all night playing at nuisances amongst unsteady adults. Eddy could have easily had similar expectations and had an idea half-prepared – a plan of how to oust me from my office and replace me with himself.

When the attack was underway and I was distracted, he switched into action mode. I became his puppet, his slave. I did what he hoped I would – I did not lead. That could have happened at any time, a break in my concentration.

We spent a lot of time together. He just had to wait for a lapse in my dominance. It happened. I left my throne for a few minutes, got involved in a different campaign to my men, and he sat on it. They needed someone to control their movements and I was not transmitting. He started sending out orders and they obeyed.

He just needed a crack. When he saw the crack in my defence he prised it open with a crowbar until it was big enough and then he squeezed through. Once he was inside he threw me out and began consolidating his position. I suspected from the very beginning he had plans to build a huge citadel where my fortress once stood.

Well, I knew the seat he was sitting on was a weak one. It was made of rotten wood, and woodworm had almost eaten through the back legs. If he rocked back on them, relaxed, they would snap – I was sure of that! It was my seat – I knew it. I understood the structure of the throne room too. If he tried to make it any larger, if the walls are pushed further apart, the ceiling would collapse.

Furthermore, the language he used to communicate was infected with a foreign dialect. The longer he went on talking, the more noticeable it would become. People would begin to mimic it. Then they would reject him because of his background. He would fall from his perch. Unlike me, he would fall onto concrete. Stone conglomerate. He was from the city. He would clear away all the hay that broke my fall thinking that it was untidy rubbish. All the King's horses and all the King's men would not even bother to try and repair him. He would be broken and no-one would come to his aid because he would be despised. I would make sure of that.

Friendship is an unusual situation. You do something for a friend because you like them. You expect friends to do things for you because they are your friends. If they do less for you than you do for them, you break your friendship because they are leeches. If you do less for them than they do for you, they end the relationship because you are living off their good nature. So, you do not gain anything from friendship, you merely get what you give. If you did not give, you would not get – and because there is pleasure in receiving, you take the risk of giving. You are only happy when you get as much as, or even a little more than, you give out. You are unhappy when you receive less.

If we all admitted the reality of this predicament, there would be a lot of depressed and lonely people in our society. So we create untruths like "it's not the receiving, it's the giving that I enjoy". And we watch Scrooge at Christmastime to ease the pain of giving things away. And people dream up plans for perfect societies where possessions and property are unimportant and wealth and power are insignificant. But the dreamers are nurtured by the society they condemn – and fail to appreciate the impossibilities of their ideas.

The worst thing that can happen is for your friends to turn their backs on you. People you have trusted, donated your precious time to, helped, lent things to, had in your home and showed your weaknesses to – are the only ones who can shit on you.

That may have been my mistake – letting my friendship get in the way of my leadership. The two should have been separate. Leaders do not show their vulnerabilities, friends do. It is better to keep a distance from those you want to command, let them know you as a leader – nothing more. You can respect a leader only if you always see their strong side. You are not able to totally respect a friend because you see their weaknesses. I realise now that the people I respect most are the ones who hide the chinks in their armour, cover their tender spots. Good leaders must be good actors to the end. Jesus made a mistake by crying out "God, why have you forsaken me" while he was dying on the cross. He let himself down. He gave the doubters a reason. I will never forget those words.

However long a leader has been in charge and however many times you have seen them looking good in pictures, on television or on film, you will never forget the image of their fall. You will never forget how they looked during their resignation speech, their assassination, their deserved death at the hands of a mob. Our society is fascinated with downfall – that is why Christians worship the cross.

At the moment of their collapse you see them as people, their superhuman shell is broken. The God is proven to be Homo sapiens sapiens. You realise they have at least one flaw – mortality. It is fascinating to observe.

Tragedy works the same way in fiction. It takes characters who should be perfect and shows that they are far from it. It reveals their human nature. We like to know that even the greatest have faults and can be brought down from their elevated positions. But, at the same time, we like to believe that those who rule us are better humans – it makes us feel secure and we need people to aspire to, role models. Our humble humanity makes us want incorruptible, indestructible leaders. When we see they are not that, we lose faith. But we enjoy seeing the mighty topple because our insecurity and jealousy wants them destroyed.

The eternal greats die early. They die before they drop and their infallibility is never disproved. And even old age is a failure when youth and beauty are things we aspire to. The greats: JFK; Alexander of Macedonia; James Dean.

"Live fast, die young, be famous."

I did not want to die young. And I felt that eight years old was too young. I also realised that as proud as I was of my ability to carry out applied and dedicated thinking, it was easy to become narrow-minded. The thought process can become linear – and although the straight road is the fastest one to victory, it is also the speediest route to destruction. A great many famous philosophers have pursued ideas so far in one direction that they have reached the edge, the abyss beyond human thought and they have fallen in. The result is the same as falling from a too high building – self-annihilation, physical and mental demise. They become trapped at the end of a narrow corridor built by unchallenged reason. They journey so far in one direction that they forget how to retrace their footsteps and they become so obsessed with building the corridor that they neglect to take time to construct doorways – ways out. The only extra work they do during the construction phase is fortification. They end up trapped by their own reason.

I think that my last sentence is a difficult one to understand so I will try to explain it more clearly:

A philosopher (somebody who tries to form understandings of the world) thinks that the purpose of society is to grow potatoes. In turn, the potato feeds society – a cyclical system. The logic is upheld.

The philosopher comes to his conclusion by considering the evidence: Sunday roast; the local chip shop; crisps; farms; companies that make the metal ties for sealing potato sacks; lorries and working gloves; instant mash; Spud-U-Like – the list is endless.

The philosopher lives in a traditionalist middle-class family where meat, potatoes and two veg are not just the norm – but compulsory. At school the philosopher sees only chips, roast, boiled or mashed.

One day this philosopher goes to stay for a weekend with an aunt and uncle. Hell. They go out together for an Indian meal. The food is all right but his theory is devastated. The meal is based on rice.

All the philosopher can now hope for is seventy more years of life to prove that rice can damage the mind and its continual presence in meals will totally undermine the national way of life. It is that or admit to making a mistake! And if

the philosopher admits to making one mistake, how can we believe any of the other theories the philosopher has formulated?

I saw how I could create a similar trap for myself and I wanted to avoid it. So I took a few days off from thinking. Those days were escapist bliss. The thinking process crept back of its own accord. It was not invited, it began subconsciously and grew until it spilled over into my conscious mind. When I discovered that I was once again analysing what had happened at the barn dance, I was ready to do so. I had cooled off. The anger had left my mind.

I was in a gang called the Titans. I used to be their leader. A guy called Eddy had taken over. I wanted to be back in my original position. I also wanted to enjoy life – that was important. That may have been the difference between Eddy and me – I was interested in enjoying myself. I had the joy of the countryside in me (even if my eyes did not show it). He had the coldness of suburbia in him (even though his eyes did not show it).

Leaders must be strong. I wish I had not reacted like I did when I was accused of deserting the Titans. I did. That is life. I learnt. I would not do it again. I was unprepared for the challenge. Next time I would be ready. First of all I needed to retake my seat. That would take some time. I would not let it become my only goal though. I would stay open-minded. My time would come, my boat would come in. Meanwhile, I would enjoy life.

Strength is not narrow-mindedness. Some of the weakest people in the world are narrow-minded. They are narrow-minded because they are incapable of accepting more than one set of possibilities, one way of seeing the world. That is weakness. Strength must come from being able to perceive all the different ways people live and think. Develop theories but allow them to be flexible. Treat rules as guidelines, not barriers. Leaders should have useful reference points, not ultimate goals. Work with people, not dogmas. Management, after all, contains the word man.

I want to lead people. I want to lead because I know I can see things that most people can not. I can understand, interpret, relate to, react to many things that others can not. It is my duty, therefore, to share my gift, let others benefit from it. Part of that sharing is taking command. The masses will want to follow. They want to be helped, saved. I can help. I can see, warn, assess, decide, do.

The Titans would be my beginning. I would develop my ideas and leadership skills through it. I would use my experience with this gang to build a foundation of leadership knowledge. I had learnt. I would continue to learn. The Titans was my training ground, my beginning.

That thought was my Christmas holiday conclusion. Happy with creating a solution to satisfy both my desire and my intellect, I rested. I rested from the hours of frustration I had suffered while an answer evaded me. I spent the remainder of my holiday devouring cold turkey and lying on the rug in front of our open fire.

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# MR BOURG'S FISH

Everything was different on the first day back at school after that holiday. I was in a new position, I was different. I had grown older and learnt a lot. I noticed things. I looked at brick walls that I had passed hundreds of times and they seemed different. They were no longer just solid structures. They had character. My every glimpse of them was filled with a hundred thousand shades of brown, orange, grey, black and red.

The dull stones, the ones that lined the road near the school gates, were suddenly interesting. They shone in the morning light, without glaring. Their greyness was as bold, as outstanding as the moon I had stared at for hours the night before.

The school building's windows looked wise. They had certainly witnessed countless lessons (even if they were rather basic). And they had watched generations of children file through and return for harvest festivals and nativity plays. They were shiny and bare, prepared for another term of bright self-portraits and other unrecognisable pieces of paper. I knew, on that first day back, that those windows were watching me. They were looking at Axel, me. They were looking at me because they knew I was going to be someone special, someone remembered, someone famous, someone great.

I was the first person in school that day. I left home early after having slept very little the night before. I told my parents that I was going to go via the stream to collect some water shrimps to take to school because Eddy had never seen any. I lied. I just wanted to be the first to arrive at school that day.

My parents might not have cared deeply for my emotional wellbeing – but if anything went wrong, the scandal would have been difficult for them to cope with. They would always be labelled as "the couple whose lad fell off a roof" or "the couple whose son got crushed by a tractor". And to be defined in terms of me, their offspring and inferior, would be the worst thing that could have happened to them. That is why they kept me down, down off roofs, down psychologically. And that is why they kept me out of the way, out of the way of motorised vehicles and out of the way of their lives.

I was their plaything, their homemade toy. They always wanted to know what I was doing so that they could control me. After all, if you have a radio-controlled aircraft, you need to keep it in your sight or it will crash. And there is no greater torment for model aircraft enthusiasts to bear than the shame of crashing your plane because you lost sight of it. From that moment on you would be known as "the couple that let their plane go out of sight and crash". What could be worse? It is much better to be known as "John and Emily, you know – the ones who have that lovely spitfire. It's a beautiful model, destined for great things they say. I've heard it will be going to public school and may even play rugby for the country. It is a fine specimen, pleasing to look at and intelligent too. I've heard it could speak complete sentences only eighteen months after it was constructed. Oh, they are such a nice couple – and they look after their model meticulously."

So, there I was, gliding around the empty playground, out of control, running closer to walls than most would dare, watching colours blur in the corners of my eyes. But not touching the walls, knowing that these solid cliff faces were harmless if treated properly. I was flying above the expectant tarmac, being

watched by windows, conversing telepathically with the school building and breathing in chilled, clean village air.

I seemed to spend hours running around the school; over its playgrounds; in and out of its toilets (boys and girls); along the bit of grass around the back of the prefabricated classrooms and down the alleyway at the back of the assembly hall. I lost sight of and concern for time. It was wonderful. I will never forget it – that feeling of freedom. Whatever happens to me in the future – however horribly I am shaped by society, events and people, I will always know that freedom. If a doctor told me I was going to go blind in twenty-four hours and I was free to go anywhere, I would spend all those hours running about those playgrounds in the changing light of day and night. I would see ten million colours. I would meet again all the shades I saw that morning. And I would not bother to name one.

Nothing lasts for ever. And if what you are doing will come to an end when unwanted others arrive on the scene, it will be over even more quickly.

The Head arrived first – to unlock. From that moment on, I sat on the wall by the road and watched everyone else pass through the school gate. Eddy, Joe and Richard exchanged greetings as they looked up at me. I watched them go into assembly. I followed a few minutes afterwards. My sheep were in the fold. They may have thought they were following Eddy – but I was the shepherd. He was just the sheep that happened to be in front at the time.

"Welcome back everyone. I pray you have all had a good Christmas holiday – and I hope you all took time during the Christmas period to think about the true meaning behind all the celebrations and the giving of gifts. Christ's birth gave us a new beginning. His teachings presented us with a new way of seeing the world. Today is the first day back at school this year. It is a new start. Let's approach this year in a new light. Any mistakes made last year are put behind us now. If you were lazy or naughty last year – then make it your New Year's resolution to be better this one. This morning's hymn is Morning has Broken. It is hymn number sixty-two." – The Head.

After a few introductory notes on the piano:

Morning has broken  
Like the first morning,  
Blackbird has spoken  
Like the first bird.  
Praise for the singing!  
Praise for the morning!  
Praise for them, springing  
Fresh from the word.

Sweet the rain's new fall  
Sunlit from heaven,  
Like the first dewfall  
On the first grass.  
Praise for the sweetness  
Of the wet garden,  
Sprung in completeness  
Where his feet pass.

Mine is the sunlight!  
Mine is the morning  
Born of the one light  
Eden saw play!  
Praise with elation,  
Praise every morning,  
God's recreation  
Of the new day!



Eddy chaired his first meeting well. He was a good diplomat. He let Joe and Richard think that he was using their ideas – but used his own. I could see what he was doing because I understood the devices he was using. I had used them myself. I chose to contribute, now and again, when I knew Eddy was not going to disagree with what I said. I would make statements that stood out because they were well constructed. I did not try to challenge Eddy's opinion. But when his argument had a weakness, a contradiction, I would play on it. I would subtly reveal it to Joe and Richard.

I waited continually for an incongruity in his logic, an opening. When one appeared I would drive a nail in. Sometimes he would remove the shaft with a counter-argument. Sometimes he could not. Whichever of these two occurred, my spike had been forced in and his facade of perfection was blemished. Scarred or permanently impregnated, my attacks hurt him. I liked doing it. I knew I would win the battle eventually. Each time I challenged him his elevation was lessened and I rose. I knew that one day we were going to be at the same level, eye-to-eye – and he would be full of holes.

We had been face-to-face before, at the barn dance, my tumble. That time he had won because he had the element of surprise on his side. And surprise is a general's greatest weapon. He had gained it in two ways: I was not expecting an assault and I did not know him well enough. My mistake. I knew that the next time we sized up he would have neither of those advantages – but I might. I would be prepared, more developed, calm and strong. Strong like the walls that formed the main building at school – a building that had stood for over seventy years. I would be solid. Solid like the stones that lined the road near the school. Stones that had existed for millions of years.

"I'm glad to hear that you got on well with your brother over Christmas Rich. I hope that after having been close you will stay that way – and I also hope the trouble he was getting at Street last year will stop. Thanks too, Axel and Joe, for your reports on events over the last three weeks.

As far as I am concerned, I must say I am honoured to now be officially recognised as the leader of the Titans. I hope that I will do the job to the satisfaction of all of you – I certainly will try to. This is our first meeting of the year and it begins a new page in the history of the Titans. With all that said and done, I do have a subject that I feel needs our consideration and, if agreed, our action.

It is this. I don't know if you all know him – but, in a house called Beech Cottage, down by the main stream – a little way upstream from the waterworks, a man called Mr Bourg lives with his wife. He has lived there for about three years now and has two ponds in which he keeps trout. He also owns a long stretch of the stream and now and then releases some of the trout, which he feeds up to get large, into the stream above. He uses that stretch of it to fly-fish in with his friends.

Last year, when kids from the village went and played in that bit of stream, he chased them off. I am told that the previous owner would let kids play there. He's not even happy about people walking along the path by his bit of stream – and it's a public right of way. Last September the council put up a fingerpost next to the road to show that it was a right of way – and he took it down.

I feel that is enough evidence of wrong doing for us to debate this issue. But, there is more. Last week, Steven Whiley and John Edwards went down to the road at the end of his part of the stream and were fishing on the other side. He snuck up on them and confiscated their rods saying their parents could collect them and he tipped their bait into the stream. He claimed that they were letting their hooks float down the tunnel under the road in an attempt to poach his trout. I think we should take some action. I vote that we should do something to get revenge for Steve and John.

My idea is to create a disturbance from the road when he is fishing with a friend and shout out what he has done to publicly embarrass him. I think we should try and make him feel guilty in front of his friend, make him feel small." – Eddy

"Well I can understand people wanting to protect their land and livestock. If people went trampling all over my dad's crops he'd set the dog on them. And if we thought some poachers were around we'd phone the police straight away and my dad would be out there with his shotgun. You've got to look after what's yours because no-one else will. You've got to be able to see it from his side." – Joe.

"There's a lot more to it than that Joe. If there is a public right of way then you've got to let the public use it. There's one past your house from the main road to the corner of the wood – and your dad doesn't try to stop people using that. And playing in a stream doesn't cause any damage. And Steve and Johnnie weren't breaking the law if they were on the other side of the road. I know that tunnel. I've looked down it. It's pretty long. The chances of getting a hook to go all the way down it aren't very high. Its full of sticks and stuff too. Even if they did get a bite, it would be almost impossible to get the trout back. If anybody acted wrongly – it was Mr Bourg. He's not particularly friendly anyway. David said he gave him a bollocking once for weeing in the stream in the forest. He said it would go into his stream and poison his fish and then go onto the waterworks and infect the drinking water for the village. That's rubbish, and look how many cows and sheep piss and shit in the stream. And the waterworks process the water anyway – they don't just pump it straight to the village.

I think we should do something to Mr Bourg. He is arrogant and he thinks he can get away with pushing people around. What do you think Axel?" – Richard.

"Well, I agree with you on the legal aspects Richard. And you've got to realise Joe that there is a difference between a farmer who protects his crop – which is there for his survival and the good of many, and this bloke who is stopping others from enjoying the countryside which is legally theirs. I'm with Eddy. We should do something. But I don't think that shouting will be enough. He could just ignore us. Actions speak louder than words." – Me.

The debate raged on. Opinions were thrown in, piled up. Joe probably kept quiet after he had been proved wrong. He was like an elephant hit with a tranquillising dart when his argument had been cast aside. He would loll about for a few hours in silence before returning to normality. It was impossible, even for me, to know what went on inside his head during those tranquil periods. He gave no clues whatsoever. He was obviously thinking – but that was as much as could be said.

Whenever I observe dumb, inactive, blank-faced and silent people I always think of them as Joes. I give them his characteristics. I see them as slightly slow and not too good at articulating their thoughts. I look at staring, uninvolved eyes and behind them I see a Joe who has been temporarily silenced by a superior being. I am always wary of them too – because if they are going through an internal thought process, they might come to the conclusion that they should jump up and attack you. And Joes, those who refuse to think out loud, are the most likely types to suddenly take an unexpected course of action. And they can be physically strong. Dangerous quiet types.

Seeing all noiseless faces as Joes is wrong – I know that. It is wrong to expect one person to display all the characteristics of someone else you can remember from your past just because they act similarly. But it happens. I will give you an example.

If you got beaten up by a gang who all wore red shoes – and their shoes were the most noticeable thing about them – and the only thing you saw as you were being beaten unconscious on the floor was red shoes being driven into your tender, bruised body and red toe-caps closing in on your hurt, bleeding face. And if your eyes closed to try and make the red shoes disappear but failed. And if, as you opened them again, you witnessed those red leather bludgeons smashing your blood vessels and tearing your flesh and emptying your lungs and bladder – an impression would be forced upon you. I would imagine, if that happened to you, you would form a dislike for red shoes – and perhaps anyone wearing them.

That is how we learn – how human creatures discover what is sharp, poisonous and too hot. We are born with an empty memory and spend a lifetime filling it up with knowledge and prejudices. We learn, or are taught, to be wary of people wearing red shoes. We develop phobias too. Seeing red shoes might cause us to feel fear or faint – or want to fight.

I did not have a phobia of silent faces then. But I do find them frightening now. They intimidate me – especially large numbers of them all looking at me. I have since learnt that speechless, staring faces are usually making judgments. If they are looking at you, they are judging you: jurors at court; the audience at the theatre; crowds watching firemen fight a fire; spectators at an athletics meet; the inquisitors in a police interview room.

Now, when I realise hushed empty faces are looking at me, I see judging Joes – lumbering, clumsy idiots who have not got the intellect to offer an opinion – expressionless, dumb observers who watch and judge. I see silenced fools who retreat into an unimaginative, heavily influenced, biased thought processes that rely on inherited and taught values. I see someone making assessments based on a moral code that has been given and accepted without question – accepted because the individual lacks the ability to create their own. That is why I hate silent types. They think they are so bloody clever – and they are not! They cannot think, so they do not speak – but they still make judgments!

Being able to relate quiet faces to Joe helps me because Joe was an idiot. An idiot. An idiot trampled all over by his father but too dumb to figure out a solution to his own problems – or any others. I wanted to help Joe – but he chose that night at the barn dance to find a substitute for his father instead of a friend. The substitute

was Eddy. Joe wanted to be guided and controlled. Eddy did that. I could have helped Joe learn to think for himself. He rejected me.

I used to accept Joe's speechlessness. I used to be able to get involved in an argument with whoever was talking – and just ignore silent faces. Now I realise that people who do not contribute verbally are just as involved in a conversation as those who do – and they are more dangerous because they are not giving others an opportunity to challenge their thoughts. They are letting a notion develop into an opinion without consultation. They are dangerous.

We came up with a plan. It was mainly Richard's I think. The proposition was to block the tunnel on the other side of the road from Mr Bourg's house. We realised that we could cut the water off from his ponds for at least ten minutes (using approximations concerning the flow volume of the stream and the holding capacity of the resultant dam – guesswork).

I used to, and still do, enjoy forming cross-references between seemingly unrelated topics. I strongly believe – no – I believe that once you are aware of something new, it becomes absolutely related to everything else you already know.

I was first taught Christianity, then atheism. From those two I formed my own religious point of view – resolved my faith. Then I heard about reincarnation and had to think again. Then I heard of witchcraft, then the Earth Goddess, then the gods of Olympus, Hinduism, Voodoo, Jehovah's Witnesses and then Catholics and Protestants and fighting and suffering. Everything is related and that is how things are inside my skull. Now any decision about which path to take is harder – because it's a bloody maze.

The point of this reflection is that I found a lot of similarities between what we planned to do to Mr Bourg and the judgment of God – something about which we had heard a great deal in school assemblies. We were going to dam the old bastard. And dam sounds the same as damn. We planned to be his damnation. We wanted to part the waters like God did for Moses, tame the water like Jesus did. We were going to sever the under-road artery to his fish, his babies (the Bourgs had no children), his heart.

I do not know what day we got there – to the point where the stream ran under the road and then over Mr Bourg's piece of stream bed. It was probably Sunday because it was the usual day for us to do things as a group; because it was term time and got dark early; because we never went to church; and because Saturdays were for morning television and afternoon playing. There was no specific reason to carry out our operation on a Sunday even though that was the most likely day to find Mr Bourg at home. He was at home that day, whatever day it was. I will say it was Sunday because that fits nicely with my biblical allegory.

Punctuality was an attribute we valued as Titans. It was necessary, we met often. It is not a bad thing anyway. It is not a device to control others – not if it is used by mutual agreement. We all arrived on time.

"Right, let's get started. We want a big flat stone large enough to cover the end of the tunnel. So spread out and get looking." – Eddy.

A better leader, me for example, would have arrived a few minutes earlier at the scene to see what materials were available, and then devised a modus operandi. Eddy failed to do that.

We got our hands dirty. We searched through the mud and silt for flat stones. None were big enough. There was not a suitable "flattie". A change of plan was required.

A slight fault. A chink. I chose not to dive in. When mistakes are that obvious, silence can be the best way of illuminating them. That way the mistake cannot be defended. If you plan to destroy someone, self-inflicted wounds are the most pleasurable to observe. Witnessing them gives you a feeling of superiority, dominance – things happen as you want them to without needing to get your hands dirty.

A pause.

We washed our hands in the stream, cast some silent judgment on Eddy's unsuitable approach.

"OK, we will have to build a dam in front of the tunnel with the largest stones we can find. We'll also need smaller ones to plug the gaps. And gravel to fill the holes. And clumps of turf to cover it all – so that no water can get through.

I need one of you to help me build and the other two can get all the stuff." – Eddy.

"I'll help you Eddy." – Richard.

I did not want to help him. I wanted someone else to work with him. Joe was too slow to volunteer – or Richard was too quick. I knew, if this attempt was going to fail, the best place for me to be was with the a labourer. This meant that the artisan working alongside Eddy would graphically witness the failure of his plan. And I would be able to subvert my mate once he had gained respect for me as a grafter – we would become a pair of disillusioned partisans.

The second attempt *did* fail. I hope that does not sound contrived. It was bound to fail. The water ran too fast and even the large stones refused to stay where they were put. The smaller ones were simply washed away and the occasion never arose to use gravel. A turf attempt was aborted as broken clumps of drowning roots were sucked into the tunnel and their orange-brown mud was washed out of their once-healthy bodies.

All we succeeded in doing was changing the crystal-clear liquid of life beneath us into an ugly, dirty, opaque fluid. It was no baptism, we were polluting the pure water with sin, not using it to cleanse the pieces of turf of their earthy theft. We were dyeing Adam's ale with ochre, filth! We were defiling the virgin. We were the polluters, the creators of decay, the wallowers in the mire.

"This'll do it. If he sees the colour of this water he'll go crazy. It'll turn his ponds brown and he'll go mad – and he can't stop us. We can do what we want on this side – the bloke who owns this field is a friend of my dad's – we're safe." – Joe.

It was not enough. Cows used the field we were in and drank from the stream. Mr Bourg did not like his water being mucky – but he had lived in Beech Cottage for three years and, I should imagine, he had learnt to accept it turning brown. To city folk dirty water is unhealthy. The people of Hill village knew that dirt settles

and discoloured water returns to clear water once the conditions that have caused it pass. And anyway, Mr Bourg did not sit in his front room watching his stream to see if it changed colour. We had to do more.

In a mood of disappointment I threw a stone into the water in front of us. It made a big splash. The water jumped into the air and went all over my legs, chest and face. That was the very moment at which the solution came to me. It was the perfect time to suggest an idea – immediately after Eddy's plans, and Joe's and Richard's, had failed. That moment, watching the stone and feeling its power, was the first step on my climb back to the top. And one step was enough. I had made it to the first rung and I knew that the best thing to do was consolidate my position before moving on. I wanted to get back to the summit – but I wanted to feel secure there!

"Why don't we throw stones at his fish from the road. There are always a few trout hanging about at the far side of the tunnel – we could try and hit them. Target practise. If we kill one it'll float downstream. Even if we don't hit any – it will definitely get his attention and he'll probably come over. But he can't do anything because we're not on his land. That's right isn't it Richard?" – Me.

"Yes, if we're not on his land he can't touch us." – Richard.

"And all the dead trout will pile up against the mesh at the entrance to his top pond. He'll definitely see that!" – Joe.

"That's a good idea Axel. Thanks. OK, everyone get some small sharp stones – ones that you can throw easily – and sharp so they'll go further through the water." – Eddy.

He was a good co-ordinator and instigator of action. That was something I could learn from him – how to take charge of an operation, get a plan in motion – even if it is someone else's. Once people have seen what direction to head in, they will join you.

I got round heavy stones – to be different, to show some defiance. Anyway, I thought bigger ones would be more effective at attracting Mr Bourg's attention – make a bigger splash. And it was my idea. I earned the right to deviate a little from Eddy's order.

The throwing began. The stoning. Assault.

Very soon Mr Bourg emerged. We stopped. He had seen us.

I expected (even though he was about sixty years old) to see him come running out of the house waving a stick or a shotgun. Bluff was still a powerful means of intimidating the people in Hill village – especially the younger ones.

He did not run. He walked. He had a stick – but it was the type that elderly, close-to-retirement businessmen who take over country homes use to convince themselves they are rustic. It was not a thick, heavy stick ideal for frightening small boys – or an iron-hard hand-held one that gamekeepers use in battle or for delivering thrown agony to a fleeing poacher.

Mr Bourg walked with self-respect. He looked important. He used the air of confidence that Victorian landowners used to scare their labourers and their families into submissive behaviour. It worked with us. We saw a clean-handed, well-dressed, intelligent man walking towards us – us four muddy, wet, small creatures. He impressed me. I admired him. We had underestimated him and got

it wrong. He approached without a fraction of doubt in his mind of his own righteousness.

Richard ran first. Then Joe. Eddy looked at me, I stood fast. Eddy ran.

Mr Bourg was about fifty metres away at that point. His pace did not alter – neither did my gaze. He was not a foot-propelled torso making its way, step by lumbering step, towards me. He was my destiny – about to become involved in my fate in thirty seconds.

He floated towards me.

Twenty-five seconds.

Only Time stood between us.

Twenty seconds.

He was going to teach me.

Fifteen seconds

to see more

ten seconds

to see differently.

Five seconds.

"Yes – what can I do for you?" – Him.

That was wrong. He asked what he could do for me. That was not meant to happen. I did not expect that approach!

I froze, a shrew hearing the scream of a barn owl descending upon it. As prepared as the shrew is for any attack, with fidgeting body and a fast-acting mind to match, it can be pinned to the spot by a barn owl's voice. It may have heard owls before – and hesitated like a debut centre forward who misses an open goal. But the sound has a wholly different effect when it is directed at the creature. The owl was above it, hungry. It had singled this one out. The noise was new. It froze.

"Just a little vandalism then?" – Him.

What! Me? A sprayer of graveyards with FUCK OFF's; a pissers making subways stink; a smasher of church windows; an arsonist; a mindless destroyer; an "easily led"; a puppet – a no one.

"No" – Me.

"Oh. So you've got a purpose then!

So what are you crusading for?" – Him.

His words were so good! They sort of set me up and sort of put me at a disadvantage at the same time. He gave me viable answers – but they carried negative connotations. I realised immediately that I could not outwit his experienced mind. But I had seen enough of the man to know I wanted to talk with him – to learn from him. The only way to achieve that was to use honesty – offer him our manifesto and let him ridicule it. I knew that in debate I would be horribly defeated. All I could do was let him persecute my principles and observe how excellently he did it.

"You – they say you took John's and Steve's rods – they weren't breaking the law – they won't tell their parents 'cause they'll get into trouble. We – came to try and get them back – they're our friends – at school." – Me.

"Hmm. I see. Well, this isn't the right way to get heard. But I do understand. Sometimes the end justifies the means. Sometimes. Were they your gang?" – Him.

They were of course. They *were* my gang – and they were also no longer there. They were no longer my gang either. But he meant more than that. He was still trying to call me a vandal – a destroyer of Rome, a smasher of great marble statues and a desecrator of temples. A rapist.

(Please do not interpret what happened between Lucy and I as rape. Even though I initiated our sexual contact it was not forced. She was strong enough to resist. She did not mind. I can still remember looking down at her consenting face, and smiling back at her. My eyes could see enough to interpret her reaction to me. And I could feel more than warm, sweaty softness in my hands. I could feel no form of struggle anywhere in her body.)

As resigned as I was to letting Mr Bourg tear my quest apart – I was not willing to let him label me as a vandal.

"We are a gang. But we want to do what is right – sort out things that are wrong. We don't team up to cause mischief. We do it to solve problems." – Me.

"Hmm. Little Robin Hoods. He threw stones too I should imagine. So, who teaches you? Who tells you what to campaign about?" – Him.

We were standing on either side of a barbed wire fence – me above him, physically – standing on the road. Him above me, intellectually – but standing below on the infrequently used footpath beside his stream.

"We decide for ourselves. We have meetings. But Miss Arks tells us about how to treat each other. She is a teacher at school. And the Head does bible readings." – Me.

"Come on down" – Him.

I easily got through the barbed wire fence – the thousandth I had breached in my life. He could not have managed it so easily – but he did not need to. He probably crossed much harder ones in his youth – on real battlefields. I was young. He was wise.

"Let me show you my house. I'll show you my fish too – you can feed them if you like. I think we could have an interesting chat." – Him.

He had won me over. He had looked good from the moment I saw him. His walk, his eyes, his words – all so sure. And finally he had recognised me as worthy of interest. That is more than my parents were capable of. He wanted to talk – my favourite way of passing the time. He respected me. I realise now that he wanted to pass his ideas on to someone younger. He wanted to live on in me. He was acting like every flower and bird that attempts to perpetuate itself.

Mr Bourg had no children. He was not interested in adding to the too-large population of our planet. He wanted to recreate himself intellectually – pass on his ideology. My parents procreated themselves like beasts – biologically. He wanted to do it like an advanced being – with thoughts, ideas and opinions. A computer programmer. I wish he had been my father because he was a thinker.

He led me to his house – alongside the undrinkable water – he made me feel wanted – he guided me along a path that in places had become overgrown and invisible – I walked by his side, watching how the solid staff in his hand made him



look powerful. The house, made from real stone, stood overlooking the stream. It was not huge, it did not need to be. But it was beautiful. It was much older than the school building I was so in awe of. It could have been the school's great great grandfather. This house stood and watched as the school building was brought into the world.

At the closest point his castle was about ten metres from the higher of Mr Bourg's two ponds. It stood in all its granite glory on a breathtakingly green manicured lawn suitable for croquet. Its windows were elegant and double-glazed – their modernity blended excellently with the traditional architecture. By the back door there were two plastic dustbins hiding inside a pinewood hutch, embarrassed by their ugliness. Mr Bourg led me straight to them and lifted the not too heavy lid to reveal them.

Each bin was full of fish food – one containing small and one large pellets. The left hand one was three quarters full of food about the size of peas – the pieces in the other were more the size of pieces of popcorn. But the smell, well, fishy. That struck me as strange, horribly cannibalistic, because it was food for fish. I guessed that the smell must have been added for the pleasure of humans – then I remembered that big fish eat smaller fish so it was natural for it to smell like that.

"What is your name?" – Him.

"Axel" – Me.

"Would you like to feed the trout Axel?" – Him.

"Yes please" – Me.

"Take a cupful of each and follow me." – Him.

I did. I took a big plastic container full of each type and followed. We walked along the thistleless lawn. It was so well cared for it seemed to massage my feet through my trainers as I walked across it. (We all put our footwear back on when we gathered on the road to throw stones.)

I walked to the water's edge to throw food, not rocks, at the fish. I bounced along the soft, weedless expanse of green. It was like walking on sponge. Mr Bourg was obviously used to luxury underfoot. That is why he appeared to float above the ground as he walked. And I can understand why he tried to stop people trampling over his land. If too many people share a luxury it becomes something ordinary. That is why he made attempts to protect his retreat. We stopped at the bank of the lower of the two ponds, the pond furthest from the house.

"These are the small ones, throw them the food." – Him.

I grabbed a handful of the smaller feed and cast it into the tranquil pond. A trout came almost immediately and snatched a piece. Then another. Then a few more. They came again. And then, all was still. Mr Bourg grabbed the beaker from my hand. It was still almost full.

"Not like that. Like this." – Him.

He emptied the container's contents into the air and they rained down. The trout saw the food falling from above and leapt to meet it. Manna from Heaven.

"They're just the little ones. No need to pay much attention to them. They're not worth the bother." – Him.

The water in the centre of the pond was changed into fish. A mass of them writhed around on top of each other – above the water's surface. For a while they

developed lungs and breathed in air. They walked on water. They fed. The magic did not last for ever – such is the nature of food – needed but not everlasting. Why do people find death and the end of existence so hard to comprehend when (if they are lucky) they witness it every day on their dinner tables?

We moved on to the next pond – and there I was, standing between a hundreds-of-years-old house and a pond with the largest trout in it I had ever seen – bigger than the ones in fishmongers. I was stood at the side of the pond on the edge of a perfect lawn. Down below me was a water world unlike any I had ever seen. He stood by my side.

"These are worthy of more interest. I feed up the smaller ones in that pond. I buy them as tiddlers from a trout farm. Some die, some get eaten, some disappear downstream. When one gets big enough I get in there with my waders on and fish it out with a net. Then it goes in here. They stay here for a while – and I feed them up on this food – its more expensive because its better quality. It gives them more strength and a better taste. They've got much more room to swim around in here too – so they add to, build up their strength, get stronger. Then, every now and then, I open the sluice gate at the top and let a few swim up into my bit of river. There they get stronger still – that's where I fish. Are you impressed?" – Him.

"Yes" – Me.

"Well, go on then, feed them. This time a handful to each corner." – Him.

I threw scooped handfuls – he guided me. First a handful by the reeds on the far side. Two or three giants grabbed the food floating on the surface. A scoop into the centre and five or six monsters were summoned from the deep to feast. A grabful towards the rocks in the corner enticed four or five more out of their lairs. Finally I emptied the rest of the container into the place where the stream rushes through a wire mesh into the pond. The last of the fish bread floated along the pond's surface and was collected by marginally hungry water dwellers in languid flashes of rainbow scales, dorsal fins and razor-sharp teeth.

The last of the pellets was swallowed up and the pond returned to its resting state. I looked up at Mr Bourg. He smiled.

"I think you understand why I look after what I have earned. I've worked hard all my life to get this. You could have something like this one day too. I don't necessarily mean trout and a fishing beat – that might not be your thing. You can get whatever you want – don't let anybody tell you otherwise – I didn't. All is achievable – nothing is impossible. One day you may be living in a house that makes my place look like a little shack – and you will be able to look out of a magnificent window and see acres of land, and rivers, and forests, and mountains, and lakes, and a huge drive and gardens and you'll be able to say "All of this is mine". Hmm. One day, hey? Wouldn't you like to say that?" – Him.

"I don't know. I wouldn't know where to start. I don't know anything about money." – Me.

"Come in for a coffee – or an orange juice – whatever you drink. I've got some spare time. I'll tell you about the world." – Him.

I went in. There was a time when I would have followed the Minotaur into its labyrinth or Lucifer into Hell before following Mr Bourg into his manor. But things had changed. The Titans had renounced my leadership and fled in the face of an

enemy. And, more importantly, Mr Bourg was offering me one thing I had always craved for – wisdom. And I guessed that he must be wise – because of all the money he had earned and because of his age.

We entered a utility room with a red tile floor. It was full of fishing equipment, Barbour jackets and paintings of hunting dogs, horses and huntsmen. He took off his wellingtons, I took off my trainers. His footwear was clean, mine was not. He took me through to the living room.

"Go and pick up that brick on the window-ledge Axel." – Him.

I went over to a house brick that seemed out of place in a room with leather furniture and a white pile carpet and expensive trinkets. As I picked it up, it jumped into the air. It was not real. It was made of a foam-like substance but it looked just like a brick. It jumped because my mind gave enough strength to my arms to lift a real brick. I was really impressed. It shattered my till-then acceptance that everything was what it appeared to be. It was something funny in a serious house. It was a joke that enabled the host to laugh at his guests – the aware to mock the naive. It was funny.

I spent several hours with him that day. My parents did not miss me because, once again, they were sure they knew where I was. I drank real orange juice out of a glass with red and blue balloons painted on it. I noticed his huge television; fine china ornaments; large collection of old looking books; glass topped coffee table; drinks trolley and more. The room was comfortable and quiet – the stone walls and double-glazing meant that any noise that dared approach the house was kept outside.

I relaxed in his cathedral and listened to his preachings. He told me about heads of unions who said they represented the workers and used the workers' money to send their children to public schools. He told me of policemen who were encouraged by bribes to put their magnifying glass to their blind eye. He explained that, no matter how fair society was, there would always be some at the bottom and some at the top. He told me that the Church owned a huge amount of land and had many other assets. He told me that only a small percentage of the money donated to charities ever reaches the needy. He explained how politicians just look after their own interests – no matter what party they belong to. And he told me that leaders are born, not made. "Born to lead." That is what he said. Napoleon, Wellington, Gordon, Lawrence – "Born to lead". Born leaders.

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# THE BUILDING SITE

"Well, he asked me what we thought we were doing so I told him that John and Steven were our friends – and they would be in trouble if they didn't get their rods back. He said he'd give me them if I let him show me what he had been protecting. He showed me his trout ponds and his house and he gave me an orange juice and we talked for a while. Then he gave me the rods and I left." – Me.

The report I gave to the Titans the following Sunday was not completely accurate. It was selective, rearranged, altered a little. If you think I twisted the truth – you are right. If you think I lied – you are right. They ran, I stayed. They forfeited the right to have first-hand knowledge of the events at Mr Bourg's home the previous Sunday.

Anyway, second hand information is never accurate: the media distort; cameras produce framed pictures; photographers carefully select their images; reporters are outsiders interested in good stories; editors have their biases and the radio needs to sound good. The majority of everyday happenings are not filled with exciting pictures and sounds. Facts are always presented in a more suitable fashion for retelling.

Even our own minds create their own versions of the truth. When you witness an event, you are the only one who sees it your way. Everybody else sees it differently. They see it from a different perspective, angle, position. Only you relate to it in the way you do. Only you have lived your life up to that point; seen what you have seen before; felt what you have felt; judged what you have judged; heard what you have heard; noticed what you have noticed; understood things how you have understood them. You decide what to notice, what to ignore – what is important. You select the details that you feel stand out. We all do it.

That is what I did. I picked out the bits I wanted to include in my story. I changed them a little to suit my audience. I described them in a way that might give me an advantage – I felt that I deserved that right after they all deserted me. My report was altered reality. The risk was minimal – the possibility of them finding out the truth was low. And anyway, who is going to be there at the end of my life to say, "Well done, you spent seventy-eight years being absolutely honest"?

"Well done for staying Axel. I would have stayed but I thought I saw you starting to run too. I'm sure Joe and Rich would have stayed as well – if they knew you were going to. Well, it's been an experience we can all learn from. We must stick together in the future – we all stay or we all go. Axel – you did the wrong thing at the barn dance – and this time we didn't do the right thing. In the future we will work as one." – Eddy.

You might think that this confession was the perfect moment for me to launch my bid for power. If you do, I am sorry to have to tell you but you are wrong. Opportunities come and go. Often we snatch at them because we think they will not return. The needy and the greedy grab at chances. The latter of those two continue to act in the same way and that is why so many of the successful and wealthy always want more. Those with vision wait. The leader of a successful rebellion may have failed miserably a year before – and leaders of failed rebellions usually suffer for their attempt. Drake knew when to sail against the Armada – he did not let Opportunity hurry him along.

I let Eddy remain in charge. And he did one thing I would never have done. In the period between the two big Christian holidays (Christmas and Easter) – he recruited.

The Titans was established for Richard, Joe and me – Eddy became an acceptable extension. I had always believed that a small number was best for us. It was comfortable, easy to manage. I did want to *eventually* reach a large number of people with my gift and offer them its advantages. But I wanted to take my time to achieve reverence. The Titans was there to prepare me. The Titans was going to be my schooling in matters of command. Eddy had other ideas. Eddy wanted power. Craved it. He wanted to shape and control people – and the more the better. So he recruited.

By the beginning of the Easter holidays there were seven or eight of us. Their names are unimportant – except to say Steven and John joined after discovering that it was a Titan who had got their rods back. I told them that we devised and executed the plan to help them. It made Eddy believe I was fully in support of him as leader. A dedicated follower gets closer to a leader than anyone else. And I needed to get close.

Sunday meetings became more formally arranged. In large gatherings, talking without an organised system is pointless. Eddy, the traditionalist and efficient co-ordinator, set up a logical format for raising proposals and a structure to control ensuing debates. He was a good chairman but he was sitting in my chair.

All the recruits were male. The Titans was an all-boy institution. We never really discussed it, it just was. I am not saying we were misogynists – we just hated girls. (Joking!) The Titans were all boys, no questions were asked about it – no-one thought to.

"They are building a load of new houses in the field behind the police station. We have all used those fields for years now and they should not be allowed to get away with it. Nobody wants them there and the parish council were not even told about the development until after planning permission had been granted. They will not fit in and protests made about their construction have been ignored. Others feel the battle is lost – but we can carry it on. Our hands are still free to take action. We must show the `developers' that we have spirit – attack!" – ?

I really have no idea who said that – or if anyone did. The sentiment may have come from a poster that someone had put up in the window of Five Bells Store. Thinking back, it sounds like one of Winston Churchill's speeches. Perhaps it was written by Churchill – that representative of the Great British people and their defiant spirit, their inflexibility. Whoever said it, or whether or not it was ever said, we believed it. There were more Titans by then and the most important thing to them was the first of our principles – well, part of it at least – "to act in a mature manner always". The new recruits thought it meant, "act as if you are an adult member of the community". Eddy took their understanding and moulded it into a party slogan, 'Be a Titan. Be Big.'

When you want to attract mass interest, keep your policies simple. Create a general theme that will bring moth-like followers to your organisation – Eddy did. He was a skilled propagandist – Goebbels would have admired his approach. His

rallying call was designed to entice all the frustrated little people in Hill village. It worked. 'Be a Titan. Be Big.'

The building had begun. What was once a meadow offering the healthiest of meadow plants a chance to display their beauty became a wasteland, a mess. There were piles of gravel and sand and breezeblocks and bricks. There were drainage pipes and polythene sheets and cement mixers. There were muddy tracks and puddles of stained water and spillages of concrete. Suburbia was on its way and no-one had dared to spit in its face. We villagers knew we could not stop it driving its proboscis into our fertile land – but we Titans could ensure that it was left with the memory of a bitter first bite.

I was impressed with the size of the construction operation – it showed an enviable planning ability. The planners were definitely suitable opponents for the Titans. Having more members would help our campaign against them!

We decided to put a stick between their spokes – slow them down – sabotage them. It was holiday time again – Easter. Time for cracking eggs. Our parents would be at work – and so would their kids. We prepared for our finest hours. We were free to act and sure of our mission – revenge for the insult against our village. And revenge is that blow which is deserved but not expected.

We planned a modern campaign – a terrorist campaign. We understood what the Vietnamese did in their war against France and the United States. We could not defeat the enemy in open battle, force against force in a single decisive engagement. We had to undermine him, make his position unstable.

But we did not expect a victory. All we wanted to do was cause hardship. Our goal was to make him uncomfortable, disturb his sleep. We decided on nighttime attacks – careful raids backed up by plenty of reconnaissance and planning. Reconnaissance was no problem, it was our village. We knew the land, we had grown up on it. We knew where to hide and where to observe from. We knew routes in and out of the arena.

The first operation was a test. Eddy led two others on a cement-mixer tipping attack. The builders probably blamed natural causes for what they found. Our assaults went on. As soon as they expected foul play they took defensive action. They did not employ a security firm – that would have been far too expensive. They used the person that our government supplies to protect commercial interest – the policeman, Mr Steele.

It was only by chance – but it became a great advantage that we carried out this campaign during a school holiday. Had we been at school, Mr Steele could have visited and intimidated us all into submission before our offensive gathered any momentum. During the holidays we were an uncontrollable, unreachable rabble. You can only control a crowd if you can communicate with it. Mr Steele tried posters, the builders did too – but they failed because we ignored them. It is easy to ignore things written on paper.

Like all good stories, this one came to a dramatic finale. But this is just a story within my main story. This is the build-up to what happened in the summer. This is the prologue, the warm-up show. What happened later is of much greater concern. And consequence. But I must give you the background events first so that you can understand why what happened later, happened.

As the end of the holidays came close we had a planning conference to assess our effectiveness. The general feeling at the meeting was that we were a minor inconvenience, nothing more. And we wanted to do something big – make an impact. Eddy had devised a plan. He suggested we all move in on the site together and smash all the windows in the builders' portakabin. It was a wonderful vision. The portakabin was their tearoom; their refuge when it rained; their sanctuary and their office – their headquarters.

Eddy's plan also displayed his greatest talent – his ability to organise. We were given details of timings and what clothes to wear, the approaches to take and weapons to select. For D-Day he chose the final day of the week, the final day of the holidays, a day for Titanic action, the day all would be quiet on the site – Sunday. He suggested a daytime attack would give us an element of surprise after so many night operations – we agreed. Noon was chosen, Sunday at noon – it sounded right.

We met by the five-bar gate at the far end of what was once a field. Eddy waited until everyone arrived and then gave the signal for the first phase to take place. He moved forward with Richard. They returned with the message that all was clear. We all gathered, as instructed, a couple of hand-sized stones – our precious anti-window missiles. One of the company suggested at that point that we should leave the gate open after our attack to let cattle get inside and defecate all over the shattered site. Big Joe intervened. He explained that it would be irresponsible and that it was not right to use animals for anything other than the purpose they were meant for.

Like war-film soldiers we moved carefully and gleefully towards our target. (Shutting the gate behind us.) We moved through the site from the shell of one building to the next and ended up in two groups on either side of our target. On a whistle from Eddy, two men crawled forwards to carry out a close recce of the cabin. Eddy was one, I was the other. He trusted me. I think he respected me too.

The close recce was not done during the initial recce because it would have been too dangerous to get that near the enemy's base without the support of nearby comrades. Eddy and I checked each one of the windows on our respective sides and then met at the door (as arranged) to consult.

"See anyone Axel?"

"No, nobody. Not in there or anywhere else either"

"OK, we'll do it. Back to your section, brief them. We go on my whistle. Remember to make sure each window is taken out. We want total success. And remind your troops, it's the same way out and then we split – everyone straight home. No waiting. No talking. Home! OK?"

"Sure"

"OK, go"

"All right – we're going on Eddy's whistle – make sure you've got big enough stones – they need to be pretty heavy – if they aren't, swap them with bits of house brick from over there – but you should have decent ones already. We'll take the windows out one at a time until they're all broken. I'll throw first, then you, then you, then you. When the last one has been put through – we go – over the gate where we came in and then home – straight home – any questions?" – Me.



I got shakes of the head from my team. We waited in a silence of sweaty palms and cold stones and nose-breathing and dedicated stares. Eddy took longer to brief his men. He trusted the people of Hill village much less than me. That is a sign of weakness. If you believe in your own ability to lead, you should trust your men.

The whistle.

We sprang from behind our cover into full view of the portakabin's staring windows. I smashed the large one at the end of the hut with my best stone. Then I took out the first on the long side with my second. I quickly ordered the remaining three to "Go Go Go." They did. The job was done. Remaining projectiles were used to rub salt into the wounds – to increase the humiliation for the invaders.

We ran – Eddy's lot were just in front of us. We caught up with them as they threw themselves excitedly over the eye-level gate. We chucked congratulatory glances at each other before the withdrawal. Then we displayed great discipline and ran home without further consultation. The job was done. I got home a few minutes later. My parents knew nothing. I went to my room and sat on my bed.

Lying on my bedside cupboard was one of my father's books. I often read his books. I preferred them to schoolbooks which attempted to keep children's minds inert. Mr Bourg was right, teachers want us to learn but not think.

I never read the whole of my father's books – they were too long. I would take a new one every week or so and put it by my bed. It would become my 'goodnight bible' for a few days. Before going to sleep, I would flick it open and read what was in front of me. The Head had told us that this was the best way to use a bible – so I reckoned that it was the best way to read any book. But like the bible, my father's books were difficult to read. So I would read for a bit and then look at the pictures – which were easy to find because they were usually on a different sort of paper. Pictures told me a lot and there were normally small, easy-to-read captions to go with them.

The book I picked up happened to be 'The Confessions of Idi Amin' by Trevor Donald.

As far as I was concerned at the time, Idi Amin was an evil man who tortured and killed people. I knew nothing of bias, politics or racism. When I read my father's books then, I took every word as gospel. This was particularly true when I read documentary-style books. As far as I was concerned, documentary meant truthful.

I opened the book somewhere near the middle and read about the torture of a bishop. The bit I read was written like a play, with stage instructions and then the name of the speaker followed by the dialogue. At the time I thought it was written like a comic.

In the story the bishop died and became a martyr. I can remember wondering then what it is like to know you are going to die. I also wondered what the voices of the characters actually sounded like because I presumed they did not speak in English. And I wondered why Amin looked so normal in the photographs and so abnormal in the various cartoon-like drawings splattered amongst the pages. I remembered how I had a distorted picture of Mr Bourg in my mind before I knew him. And I wondered if Idi Amin was evil or just had lots of enemies. And I

wondered if it was acceptable to kill your enemies – especially if they wanted to kill you. I wondered whose side God was on when soldiers on both sides prayed for his help.

What I remember most about that book is a picture of Idi Amin throwing a female judo instructor to the ground. They were both laughing. It was a fun picture. The text seemed unreal and the cartoons were laughably horrific. It was all contradictory – and that was how I felt. I felt confused, confused because I was no longer the leader but had just proved my worth on the battlefield. I was confused because so many different influences were telling me what was right and all were convincing and all distressingly contradictory. I was confused because I was sitting in my room alone and half an hour earlier I was outside, with my friends, excited.

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# ROPE SWING

Mr Steele was in assembly the next day – the first Monday back. Everyone knew him. The Head introduced him.

"Welcome back to school. Unfortunately I have some bad news to start this term with – I hope that our term ahead will be full of better news – things couldn't get much worse.

Yesterday some hooligans smashed the windows of a portakabin on the Orchard Rise development site. Our local policeman, Mr Steele, believes that some children from this school may have been involved. He would like to speak to you all after this assembly – so everyone remain here after prayers. First, let us sing number fifty-nine – There is a green hill far away." – The Head.

There is a green hill far away,  
Without a city wall,  
Where the dear Lord was crucified,  
Who died to save us all.  
We may not know, we cannot tell,  
What pains he had to bear,  
But we believe it was for us  
He hung and suffered there.

He died that we might be forgiven,  
He died to make us good,  
That we might go at last to heaven,  
Saved by his precious Blood.  
There was no other good enough  
To pay the price of sin,  
He only could unlock the gate  
Of heaven, and let us in.

Oh, dearly, dearly has he loved,  
And we must love Him too,  
And trust in His redeeming Blood,  
And try His works to do.

The Head said a few prayers – one dedicated to those who do wrong. It mentioned that they should own up for what they had done wrong because that was the only way to receive true forgiveness. We finished with the Lord's prayer and I remember booming out the line, "And forgive us our trespasses". I smiled. I realised that God would forgive me whatever I did wrong – as long as I remembered to ask him to.

When the Amen was done, The Head led out his posse of teachers. The lawman remained.

"Right. I know that some of you lot did this – so there is no need to repeat what happened. Your headmaster doubts my words, but, believe me – I know.

Now. In a minute, I am going to ask all of you, except the guilty, to leave. And I will deal with the perpetrators separately. Before I do, I will say this – anybody

here, anybody in this village who breaks the law will be found out and justly punished. No-one is too young to know the difference between right and wrong. I do not expect people from this village to break the law and I will not tolerate unlawfulness. Remember that.

Now, all those not involved in yesterday's violence can go." – Mr Steele.

They filed out, heads low like prisoners of war led out to build a railway. He knew we would stay – a threat against not remaining was unnecessary. We knew he would find out who had done it – by investigation, grass, intuition or interviewing prime suspects and their families. The people of Hill village respected Mr Steele – and that feeling was inversely proportional in size to the age of his victim. That is, the younger the villager, the greater the fear they had of Mr Steele's wrath.

As the innocent walked out, we, the guilty, were drawn together. Magnetism. We huddled like frightened sheep, fish in a shoal. The principle of such gatherings is that the chance of getting eaten is less if you are in a group. We stood before him, insects clinging to a floating piece of wood on a pond.

"Let's sit down boys. This table over here." – Mr Steele.

We sat. It was not quite the last supper – there were less than twelve of us. But our facial expressions were similar to those of the disciples in da Vinci's painting – anxious reactions to the master's words. In contrast our bodies were still, arms by our sides – we dared not dispute this superior being's edict. It was not a Titans' meeting, it was a herding of the Titans. Mr Steele stood while we sat on our eighteen-inch high plastic chairs around a Formica table and stared up. He had obviously done a two or three-day course on body language during his police training days, and he displayed his knowledge of power positioning to us.

I could see right up his nose – just like at the dentist's. But I held back my smile – just like at the dentist's. He was in uniform. You may have already pictured him like that. Well, he was – but it was unusual. Normally he wore ordinary clothes – probably because there was no boss to tell him otherwise and everyone knew what he stood for. He was a law unto himself – and a law unto us.

"Sixty-four pounds – to replace the glass. Eight of you. Eight pounds each. Eight eights are sixty-four – look, it says so over there on the wall. How much pocket money do you get a week Axel?" – Mr Steele.

"Fifty pee" – Me.

"Probably the same for most of you. That's sixteen weeks, four months – one third of a year. That's longer than this term, it'll be the summer holiday before four months have gone. That's a long time – especially for little ones like you. Isn't it Joseph?" – Mr Steele.

"Yes Mr Steele" – Joe.

"Criminal damage – wilful destruction of property – that's an offence. I warned you but you chose to ignore me – and you went too far. Shame it wasn't term time – I'd have got to you earlier. But then you little buggers probably realised that. Eh Richard?" – Mr Steele.

"No we didn't – well we didn't plan that." – Richard.

"Oh, well, it's just vandalism then. I won't have it. If there had been less of you the punishment would have been worse. Shame. You seem to have found protection in numbers – they must teach you something here! You will each have a

fine to pay and I'll be seeing the parents of all of you conspirators. And I don't think they'll be too pleased with having to report to the police station either. I should imagine they'll be adding to my punishment – I'd expect the worst kids! What will your parents think when they find out, Eddy?" – Mr Steele.

"Erm, I don't think that they will be too happy." – Eddy.

"No, I don't think they will be either. Well, this will not happen again – nor will anything like it. I'll be keeping a close eye on you lot for the next few months – so you'd better make sure you all stay well on the safe side of the law. Now, get back to your classes." – Mr Steele.

We left, a gaggle of geese heading for water, a herd of wild horses released from captivity, a pack of wolves. We were the village heroes – the few who had stood up for the many. Mr Steele had done his job but was probably quite proud of the little warriors who had insulted the construction company which thundered past his home and spilt concrete, sand and gravel on his lawn – contaminated his flowerbeds.

We were definitely the heroes of the school – with everyone except The Head who saw picking your nose as a cardinal sin. And perhaps with Miss Arks who really cared for us – and wanted us to make love not war. (Well not quite make love, we were too young, but certainly not make hate.)

Judy told us that her Dad had offered out drinks when our parents went round to see him – and they all went into the front room and chatted together for over an hour. Toasting us. Judy Steele, you see, was a ten year-old double agent. Her father wanted a child who could tell him what was happening amongst the younger generation in Hill – a sneak who he would pay in food and lodgings with a fifty pence a week bonus. But she passed information both ways. Swayed by the philosophy of Miss Arks who told us to respect everyone, not just those in authority, she would report back from her father's lair. She was a mole, a bug. We liked her – everyone did – most had to.

Our parents punished us – they had to. But the pocket money bans did not last as long as they should have. The adults of the village probably laughed evenings away at the Carpenter's Arms talking about our audacity – our daring to do what they wish they could have done – our courage – their children.

As that term went by, things got considerably better for the Titans. We were famous. But it went to Eddy's head. He let all sorts join the Titans. He was an unwise fisherman who kept everything he trapped in his net. We did collect some big fish – but there was a lot of rubbish too – small fry.

The Titans changed again, it became a large group of the kids of Hill village meeting on a Sunday afternoon to listen to Eddy's sermons. We were having extra lessons on the weekend from a self-established eight year-old guru – and his words were uninspiring. The shaping of ideas stopped. We stuck with what we had already got – or an inaccurate interpretation of what we once had. The process of continual intellectual development was over. The pride of displaying Titanic qualities was replaced with the need to attend Eddy's weekly lectures.

Eddy was developing at that time in a whole new way. He was no longer trying to adapt to his surroundings – he was creating a character for himself. And it was

an unpleasant character – one that desired to control others – an ogre. He was becoming a monster, metamorphosing, transfiguring.

Eddy sacrificed his greatest asset – being able to fit in and adapt to his environment. He swapped his coat of many colours for a distinctive robe of office. He shed his skin and revealed a dictator's uniform. He did not just sew a stripe on his arm, he bought a new jacket with insignia on the epaulettes. He was always King Henry V and we were his subjects. We thought he was one of us – but he only put on an ordinary cloak in order to get close enough to us, to look into our eyes. He pretended to be a friend so that he could get to know us. A lord who understands his subordinates can manipulate them more easily. But he was an impostor. An outsider. And that began to annoy me as I watched the crowds following him and exalting him. Each extra week he stayed in charge of the Titans was a week too long.

Nothing much happened during the summer term. Even The Head forgot about our window-smashing escapade. Miss Arks adapted her theories when she saw that we could actually do things for ourselves. She encouraged us to build a Utopia – not destroy others. Eddy picked up on that idea. He had not shared a conversation with Mr Bourg. He was still an idealist. I knew that a society that tries to exist separately from others will eventually crumble.

His wonderful world was to be created during the summer holiday – it was to have a rope swing, a den, a stream to play in and plenty of trees to climb. He had a devoted workforce and plenty of time – the biggest school holiday. He gave the Titans a target for the summer – the construction of Eddyland. I had one too – the overthrow of Eddy.

The holiday began, and so did the event. I am referring to the event that forces me to revisit what happened in Hill during that summer. That awful summer. That unforgettable summer. That dreadful summer.

It is strange, but I remember things increasingly less well the nearer they occurred to what happened. The period around the event has become my very own dark age. Some sort of mental safety mechanism blurs my knowledge of what went on then. My memory of those days is stuck in a cloud, disorientated, lost. My brain must contain a device designed to protect me from the evil I saw. My mind hides the harsh reality of a terrible happening under a soft blanket of psychological snow. I cannot see clearly through the blizzard that exists inside my head around that summer. Snowstorms in July – strange – like raining frogs or cats and dogs. The only detail that remains sharp is the eye of the storm. The bull's-eye. The heart of the matter. The red, punctured heart.

The building went all right. I think we got the rope from Joe's dad. It would not have been twine – that would have been too weak. It must have been a towrope – or something like that. The den was made of carpets and hardboard and old crates – of different sizes of course. The carpets were used for the inside – for floors and furniture – and walls too in places.

There were lots of trees. We set up by running water – like all great cities. The stream cut a groove about twenty feet deep at its deepest. It must have taken centuries to do that. The rope swing was set up over it – at a point where there were few trees to get in the way. I set up the rope because I was good at climbing

trees. And tying knots. Yes, I was good at tying knots. I still am. The rope dangled down like a snake hanging from the roof of a chicken hut – with a nail through its head. The kids below ran round to Eddy's beck and call – ants. Poultry mites.

The swing was finished at the same time as the den. It had taken a long time to get hold of the rope whereas the materials for the den could be found everywhere. Some little kids had cleared away the weeds from our forecourt. One shat by the stream so Eddy decided he should be punished as an example.

A noose was tied at the bottom of the rope and all the Titans gathered to witness the punishment. I led him to the rope and showed him the noose in my hand. He stared back like a puppy that knew it had done wrong and was going to be punished. He begged for pity. But I looked away. I silently consulted the faces forcing me on. Eddy was smiling. It was his command, his order. I was the doer. I had to do.

I slipped the noose over his pale white neck. His collar. He did not resist. He knew he deserved to die. Adults fight against judgment. He did not. The crowd stared – in anticipation. I checked their eyes. Eddy's eyes lit up – green for go.

I am not a killer. It did not seem like murder. It was like a game, a play – an extract from one of my father's books. Like one of his books, there was no sound. I was hearing the thoughts of Eddy and the crowd inside my head – their encouragement. I was seeing descriptions of people, not people. I was hearing an author say,

"The assembled Titans are willing Axel on. Eddy has just given him a task to test his commitment to the gang. If Axel chooses to refuse, Eddy will lead the gang forever. Axel realises that he must carry out this decree. If he fails, he will never stand a chance of regaining command of his ill-led men."

I read their intentions. I even looked a few pages forward to check that it was really going to happen. It was. It was to be that little boy's end – and my trial.

Richard had presided over the investigation and found the lad guilty. Guilty of defecation in a public place. Guilty of endangering the health of the Titans. Policeman Joe had captured him and stopped him escaping during the hearing. Perhaps that was why the boy stood so quietly – he was a beaten man.

I was ordered to hang him. And he was there, crying a bit. The loud sobbing stopped after the verdict was announced – bringing huge applause from the everyone-else jury.

I pushed him. For a second or two he swung like a conker. No, more like an action man swung by the neck with some cotton – an action man with its arms pushed forward a bit and its legs hanging straight down but a little apart, and with fists clenched and no facial expression and stiffened joints.

Then he started kicking and wriggling and tried screaming. His face was shocked – his mouth and eyes opened amazingly wide – trying to summon help – but no-one came. No-one could. He was at least twelve feet from the bank and our arms were short.

He wriggled like an eel caught on a fishhook. Silently, silenced. Out of breath, in pain. His body moved like a puppet held by an over-excited puppeteer. It jumped about – suspended – out of control.



His face cried and cried and cried. No sound. But it moved in ways that I have never seen one move before – or since. It changed shape and colour and screamed without making a sound. His eyes pleaded like the eyes of a starving child near death on the news. But these eyes were real and closer – closer to death and closer to us. They pleaded a thousand times louder.

Then he just hung, looking almost like Christopher Robin standing on the bridge playing Poohsticks – but not quite. This boy was dead, and hanging straight from the neck, and we could see his bewildered face. Glistening spit trickled down his chin and mixed with last minute tears – a cocktail of bodily fluids. And dripped. His blue lips were like penny worms from Five Bells Store. His limp legs, turkey's necks hanging upside-down after being plucked. Wet in places. His arms, similar, but thinner. Quivering. His eyes and mouth remained open – unlike those of people who died on the television.

He was dead, swaying gently to the constant grumble of the stream below. We dispersed, silently. It went too far. We had created a lethal organisation and let the devil be in charge of it. The kids of Hill village had fallen into man's age-old trap – following a persuasive leader regardless of their moral instincts.

We walked away as silently as it had all happened. Eddy went to the police station to confess, to explain what he had done and ordered us to do, ordered me to do. Everyone else went home, speechless, and waited.

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# THE IN-BETWEEN YEARS

That was then. This is now. We're in the moment, in the present, living each experience as it comes. Not knowing the future. That's the way of the world isn't it. A cascading flood of unknowns. In-between are years, in-between years. Years between then and now. Only three but still years. Bad years.

I am eleven now, nearly twelve. Nearly twelve and I have spent one quarter of my years in exile. That is ten years to a man of forty, fifteen for a woman who has just reached retirement age. Twenty-five years to a centenarian. A lifetime for some.

Now, at last, I feel real again. I am me, myself. I have recovered. Recovered sanity. I lost it for a while, lost myself. I danced around a blazing bonfire and stared into the writhing embers and put in my hand to take one for myself and it burnt its shape into my palm amidst a cloud of grey flesh-burning smoke. It has marked me but I was too naive to realise it would. I held it in my hand for too long. Now the scar will remain with me for life. Not only the scar but also the smell and the photographic image of it happening, burning. A memory of it happening is burnt into my so impressionable mind.

Hargh.

My parents moved house because they thought it was "for the best". We live now in the town where Street Comprehensive is. I am three years older. I have grown. I have spent the last three years in many different schools, at times in none. I was not moved on because the other kids would find out about my past and then shun me. I do not think it was because I became unhappy either. I think my continual disturbance was my parents' revenge on me for disturbing their lives. I rocked their pretty little yacht which had been sailing on an easygoing sea of affluence and respectability. No, I shat on their graves. I took their idyllic picture-book life and drew tits and dicks on the illustrations. I drew cracks on walls and put cobwebs with fanged hairy spiders in corners. I ripped out whole sections and squashed flies between pages. I treated their self-made bible with utter contempt.

My involvement with the Titans had ruined their lovely lives – so they did the same to me. They knew that I needed to have friends – especially after what had happened – so they spent three years pushing me into and then dragging me out of pools of people. I was just a simple toy that wanted to be left alone, they wound me up in string and treated me like a yo-yo.

The years between things happening are strange times. We all have them in our lives. We remember a certain event and then another but can never be too sure exactly what went on in-between. My grandmother says that we only have a total of five minutes of real experience in our lives and the rest is just waiting for them to happen. The rest is just the bits in-between.

I find it difficult to come to terms with my in-between years. They certainly existed. I can confirm that by simple mathematics. I am eleven now and I was eight when it happened. The difference is three, three years. But they seem so distant – so far from the reality of life. But they were real. They were real because they were made up of days. Each day was, at the time, a whole day of real experience.

I often wonder why we bother with those sorts of days – nothing days. Why must they be there? It would be better to skip from one memorable event to the

next and avoid all the wasted time in-between. It would cut out the misery. The bland days, dull days, pointless days – where life is nothing more than eating and drinking and sleeping and waking and shitting and pissing and breathing – would all go.

I am trying really hard to relate to that period of my life now – and to what went on before. I want to find where I am now. I have told the story of what happened. That was not difficult. (Well it was a bit.) But what I find so hard, is to be here. To cross the gap from that summer to this September.

Each time I get close my bitterness erupts screaming from inside my body and manifests itself in my confession. There is a demon inside me. It was conceived by a rope swing dangling in the air near a den – and I think it wants to emerge. Be born. I am trying to will my body into having an abortion – but it is not working. I can still feel the evil foetus inside me. It lives within the whole of my body: sometimes it is in my hands; sometimes my head; sometimes my stomach; sometimes my penis; sometimes behind my eyes. I want to get rid of this cruel parasite, this unwelcome guest. Exorcise it. Only the future can do that.

I must do it. I must complete the testimony that will evict it from its skeletal residence. But now, in order to keep going and avoid the hatred that keeps breaking through, I must outwit the beast. It is evil – and stupid.

There was a crab once, a young crab. It was a small vulnerable crustacean with a soft shell. It lived in a rock pool that was about the size of eight baths. It grew. Its first memories were pleasant. It remembered an easy life with enough food and clean water to live in. One day its fond homely notions of warmth, comfort, safety and crab buddies were destroyed. It had a bad experience. It witnessed a murder.

An older crab, (a post adolescent about the size of a steak and kidney pie), ate one of this crab's friends. All the other youngsters were disturbed by what they had seen, but they soon overcame their shock. They were less sensitive. They put it down to experience and the process of growing up. I would imagine that one day some of his its friends might do the same. After all, there are always too many young crabs around and there would never be enough food to feed as many mature crabs.

The crab in this story, however, reacted differently. It was shocked. It decided that the crabs in its pool were a bad lot and decided to move to another one. It did, and it settled in its second home. It met lots of other crabs in this new environment and spent time doing what they did. They seemed to be a more interesting bunch. They saw life differently and played other sports.

One of the most accurate clichés in life is "the novelty soon wears off". It did so with this crab. Where it had once seen adventure and excitement, it eventually found boredom and dreary routines. It began to see no difference between the crabs in this rock pool and the ones it had known in its previous home. They were just the same as the crabs it had left behind.

So, as it had done once before, it moved on. As time went by it continued to move. Moving became a habit. Each time its stay in the next pool would shorten. Eventually it realised that there were no crabs anywhere doing anything different.

So the crab decided to find an empty rock pool. It looked for a small, unassuming abode. Modesty was one of the virtues it had decided was worthwhile.

It lived for a while in a smallish pool. It was almost a mature crab by then and was quite able to look after itself. This crab had got used to getting bored of things though. Eventually it grew tired of the sight of barnacles, the perpetually changing tides and the food it was eating day in and day out. The old scraps of flesh that it found reminded it too much of the boring life it had seen other crabs leading. It ended up hating the pool in which it was living because of the taste of the water, the feel of the rocks and the sight of the sea creatures all about it. All these things reminded it of everything it hated about crab life.

So the crab left the rock pool and travelled elsewhere. When it was elsewhere it took a pencil in its claw and began to write about crabkind. It felt far enough removed from other crabs to be able to write objectively. But while it wrote, it wondered continuously why it had disliked crab life.

That is how I feel now – removed. But I have no idea why. Is it my gift that has set me apart – or my history? I was moved around by others. Interfering hands reached into my pool and held me in mid-air for a while and then dropped me into another pool. And then they did it again a few times.

But my exile is over now. I am in the sea – the big sea. The ocean. The Comp – Street Comprehensive. I am on new ground. Like the crab I am trying to understand myself. I soldier on.

(I hope you find this valuable. My story might even help others who have difficulty understanding themselves and those around them. My story might help someone see their life from a different angle – stop them feeling weird and unwanted – make someone feel normal. It is common to find it difficult to fit into society. Society is not perfect. Everyone struggles at times – it just doesn't always show. Never judge a sausage by its skin or a book by its cover – or a person by what you see or hear – ever.)

I am going to continue because the story of the crab is not enough. I will keep going until I can provide answers – or until I can no longer summon up the will to share my thoughts.

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# **STREET COMPREHENSIVE**

What sets the human apart from other animals? Does anything? Perhaps it is our faith. Perhaps it is our motorcars.

I watch people everywhere trying to make sense of things – things that are already there – analysing the change that takes place in the molecular structure of water when it turns to ice. The polar bear and the penguin know the difference between ice and water and they survive Arctic/Antarctic conditions without scientific knowledge. In evolutionary terms, they're superior beings. They don't need artificial equipment to thrive amongst ice and freezing water and blizzards.

We design a temperature scale that relates to the melting point of ice, that is pure H<sub>2</sub>O (with no additives), under stable conditions at a pressure of 101,325 pascals (which is roughly equal to the pressure exerted by the weight of 101,325 golden delicious apples distributed over a metre square in a place where a falling mass will accelerate, due to gravity, at ten metres per second per second). Where do these conditions exist? Where can the perfect conditions be found? Only in a laboratory where ice (under control) is allowed to change to water for the purposes of finding 0°C.

We try to make sense of things. Sometimes we only manage that at the end of our lives – as the dying man said to the dagger "Ah, I see you have a point there". We create answers when we are near death because only then do we have the desire to – when we discover we have got nowhere in our lives with questions. Some people struggle for years to rationalise life and go insane because they continually fail. Others go mad because they can no longer see a point in trying to find meanings and reasons.

Whatever the point of living is, I am no longer worried about going mad. I want to go sane. I want to make sense of all the mess I have been through. That is how we are different to other animals – we want. Animals just need. Our want may give rise to poor qualities, greed for example, but want is what we have. Want is the single humanising trait. I want to succeed at Street – it is my first day here – I have just seen Eddy for the first time in over three years – and his eyes are less green than I remembered them to be. His eyes may have faded or my eyes might see less clearly now or my memory might be poor. I only saw him briefly, in a crowd. I want to look more closely at him.

I have got more to worry about than meeting Eddy. There are a lot of other people around me that I know – some less well than others. And they all have one thing in common – they all knew a different me to the one that is here now. The new me wants to be here though, amongst local children, seeing old faces that are still young and new faces both young and old.

I could never leave this place – lose contact with the many people about me that I know. That would seem such a waste. To get to know and then leave behind is a pointless exercise, pointless and sad. The idea of learning names just to forget them again ridicules life. And if I cannot take life seriously, how can I overcome difficulties? If I know that when problems are gone they lose their meaning, I will have no incentive to rise above them. I want to be here at Street Comp – and I am here, one more goat in a manageable herd – but a goat that can think for itself amongst other goats with varying abilities.

The day is beginning with an assembly – just like, but not like, old times. This is more like a political meeting than a religious one. We have formed up in years, we are standing in front of rows of joined-together chairs. There is nobody near me that I know. We are in uniform. Yes, it is a political rally.

The leader has not arrived yet. Will the leader be a young, fit male ready to rouse us into battle – or a superattractive female whose beauty could incite nations to go to war with one another? No, it is a large man with greying hair and the most discerning facial expression that I have ever seen.

As he mounts the stage with an arrogant too-heavy stride, he captivates my attention – and probably that of all those around me (the ‘First Years’). I imagine the same applies for most of this gathering. After all, it is the first day back at school after the long summer holiday – a return to discipline, a shock to the system for some! He clumps powerfully and methodically to his wooden chair and stands in front of it. Behind him come his eagle-eyed aides-de-camp. They have not quite got his imposing stature but they have their own ways of expressing authority.

The one to his left, a shortish plumpish man, stands with his hands firmly interlocked in front of his sturdy body. The one to his right, another man, tall but slight, has a stare that looks through the fleshy facade of every person assembled before him – especially us First Years. On either side of these superhumans are two women. They are two powerful queens protecting three wise kings. They are Valkyries at the gates of Valhalla – loyal to Odin and ready to descend unannounced into the land of mortals – the land of pupils. These are high priestesses – made in the image of the gods. Like all good pairs, there is a fat one and a thin one. But both are probably nasty and both probably eat fat *and* lean *and* First Years.

This is a whole new world for me, a new beginning. A new chance. It is dangerous too. It could turn sour!

He sits first – the headmaster. Then the teachers to his left and right. Then the four years behind us sit – and we are to take our cue from them. I sit down as soon as I realise we are meant to sit. Most of the other First Years hesitate. I cannot see Eddy at the moment, so I cannot tell if he hesitated – or sat down as quickly as me – or quicker! I look around for other faces I know in order to be able to label them as slow to take the initiative – but too soon the wave is underway. The sound of bums hitting seats becomes a gentle drum roll announcing the next part of the ceremony.

As the First Years collapse around me, the teachers that line the three remaining walls of the assembly hall are revealed. They are the private eyes, mercenaries, the local police, the faithful and powerful few who keep the masses in order, professional bullies.

Ah. Eddy, sitting next to the aisle in the other block. A good position for observation. I look at his head. His hair is longer now – countrified. It turns. This is my chance to check out the colour of those eyes. Dull green at the most, almost bluish-green in this light. The headmaster begins his speech by clearing his throat. The sound echoes around the hushed hall and sounds like the noise an elephant



seal on television makes to claim its territory. He is standing. I missed the all-important rise while I, or my eyes, met Eddy again.

He talks about new beginnings, about laying down foundations (I am sure I have heard this story before) and of good behaviour. We are obviously to be both taught and controlled by his staff. He wants us to shuffle into school in the morning, be fitted into the right slots during the day – and then shuffle away in the afternoon. There will not be many others in this forced congregation who understand the implications of this great man's words. I do. Eddy will do. And this time, there will be others who do too. One other thing that maths has taught me is the relationship between percentages and overall numbers. If there were once two great minds in one year at Hill School, there will be many more in the first year at Street because it is larger. This thought makes me start wondering who will be in my class.

The imposing black-robed monarch who just recently held my attention, has lost it. I have become disillusioned with him. I can now see his weaknesses: his lust for expensive chocolates; the state of his tar-coated lungs; the family disputes that ruin his self-created image of personal perfection and the worn-out cloak he is wearing that reeks of stale bodily odour, terrible snobbery and unnecessary pomp.

I wonder, who, out of this collection of mostly top-buttoned First Years, is going to be in my class. How strange it is to turn the future into the past with the passage of time. I can see faces that I have never seen before. Some of them will become members of the same form as me for three years. Some will become my classmates, comrades, friends, lovers, enemies. I will fight some of these faces in the future.

He has finished. Stopped. And I have missed something. He is leaving. Three of his cronies are following him. The thin woman is not. I hope she is going to tell us what to do next. I want to know. I must not get left behind. Shit. All the other years are standing up. They are leaving too! Getting up and going. So are some of the teachers at the sides. We are not. Phew. I will sit here – unless some of the First Years file off. If they do, I will follow. I will not get left behind.

"Welcome to Street Comprehensive. I am the first year tutor. My name is Mr Enby. That is pronounced N – B." – NB

She picks up two white cards and holds them in front of her chest. One has a large letter N on it, the other has a large letter B on it. She glances down to check that they are the right way up and round. I have heard of her – nb – no breasts. Yes, I will remember her name.

"Remember my face. If you need help and do not know who to turn to, find me and I'm sure I'll be able to help you – or point you in the right direction. I am also responsible to a certain degree for your discipline. I come between your form tutors and the headmaster. Now, I will read out eight lists of names. Each list is a form. If you hear your name then get up and come to the front where your form tutor will meet you and take you to your registration room." – NB.

One list is called. Another. One more. Another one, and another. Another list and another. I have not heard my name. I am sure she has not said it. But nearly everyone has gone. What is going on? Have I missed my signal? Oh no! Please let my name be in the last list. Nearly everyone has gone. I have got to look calm.

What if my name was called out and I did not hear it! I hate looking like an idiot. I will leave this school. I am not going to arrive late on my first day. I will not be the first latecomer in a form that I will spend the next three years in. The rest of the form will always think of me as the boy that messed it up on the first day. That is who I will be for the next three or five or seven years.

I will sit here and pretend that I am unstable. I will say that I cannot stay in the same school as Joe, Richard and Eddy – the people who caused my downfall – my unhappiest moment. I will refuse to go on. My parents will quite happily move me to another school.

"Axel Williams" – NB.

Those two words soothe my troubled mind like cold water run over a burn. The pleasure I get from the release of pressure is more rewarding than the pleasure I get when I have a piss after not having pissed for a long time. A very long time.

Silence puts its sensitive toe into the hall and then jumps in. I realise the list has come to an end. The first phase is over. I am in a group. One Aargh. No, 1R. That is my form, my class, the group into which I have been cast, my caste. We have a leader. She is dumpy. As we stand there, swarming around her like flies, I look at Mr Enby on the stage and wonder who the other three lieutenants were. I know I will find out as the days go by.

"Hallo, my name is Miss Arndroy. I will be your form tutor for this year. Please follow me – and don't get left behind because you'll end up lost. We are in music room one." – Miss A.

She turns and sets off with all the grace of a limping warthog. We follow, hyenas – not laughing though. I watch her and I know she will be my prey one day. Not yet. But one day I will make her cry. It is not her blood I want, it is her tears – they will provide vital nutrition for my developing body.

Nobody talks. We follow our guide like tourists in a foreign city. I can recognise quite a few people – not surprising considering the number of schools I have been to. But the looks I get are smiles – not scowls. If there was a cloud in my life, it is fast disappearing. Everyone about me seems friendly. Things never went sour in the schools I went to after the hanging – but after another summer holiday alone, I have forgotten about the friends I made. I am amongst a lot of people I know now. It is nice.

Eventually, through the maze, music room one.

"Please sit down at a desk, any desk." – Miss A.

Desks are a new thing. It has always been tables before. Different sized tables in different rooms – but always tables. We are older now and, as a reward for surviving this many years of life, we are provided with desks. That kid we hanged will never sit at a desk – unless there are desks in heaven. I strongly believe in heaven now – and I know that he is there. I can feel it. I hope he can forgive me for taking part in his murder. And I hope that there are desks in heaven – then he will have missed out on one less thing. The picture of a hanging body is in my head. It feels horrible – remembering being involved in killing someone. It feels like an invisible propeller has been thrust into my stomach and is slowly turning round, twisting my guts up until they go tight, slicing through my muscles, pounding against my stomach wall like a blunt axe. I will not try and forget it any more. I will

accept what happened – that is the only way I can come to terms with my life, regain my pride.

I want to be in the middle of things now – not an outsider. So I claim the centre desk immediately. The centre desk in the centre row. The others move more slowly to find a perch.

I have changed in many ways over the last three years. I am much faster at making decisions now. Before, before the hanging, I would spend too long considering action. I would waste time deliberating. After it got worse. I became wary of doing because of what I had done. Recently I have realised that spending too long thinking about something is a mistake. All that discussion, all that intellectualising I used to do with the Titans was wasted time. I always knew from the outset what I wanted to do. The debates I encouraged held back action rather than reinforced it. They held back the action I knew was correct.

Get used to being slow at decisions and you are more likely to be cajoled into making the wrong one. It is funny, but not funny – funny that the only time I should have hesitated I did not. If I had learnt to rely on my instincts more I would have paused, paused for long enough to stop myself. That is the trouble with relying too much on talk – eventually you lose a sense of self-control – you get too used to control coming from the group. And the group can be wrong. A number of people supporting a movement does not make it righteous. But when you are in a large group, you start to believe it does. You get used to carrying out the leader's instructions. The leader becomes a dictator. His command is immediately obeyed. Resistance or questioning is not expected or possible – especially when there is pressure to comply coming from all directions.

I like acting on intuition now. It makes me feel closer to my true feelings. When there is no talk to distract me from my moral code I can react immediately to the world in which I live. I am more in touch with the real world now, the real me. I know what I want to do. I know what I think. I will not be distracted by what others want me to do.

As I have said before, fish form a shoal for safety. They do it because it means the chance of them getting eaten by a bigger fish is smaller. It does not. Every fish faces the possibility of being swallowed. The odds of getting eaten are either you do or you do not, fifty/fifty. A group statistic does not apply to an individual. But I am not going to stick my head in the Irish Sea and explain that to all the little mackerel. They would not listen.

In a group it is the fastest ones who are the most likely to survive. According to Darwin that is why fish swim so fantastically fast. When a predator approaches the shoal, they turn and swim away. The slowest become fish suppers. The first to turn are the most likely to survive and later breed. The quickest movers live on. Those that rely on instinct move first – those that rely on other senses, like seeing other fish move, get eaten. That is my new theory. Move quickly, rely on instinct, survive. The followers lose out.

Please do not misunderstand me. I do intend to stay in control of my actions. Sometimes my instinct will tell me to stop and think. My new credo is all about doing – and sometimes doing means doing nothing, talking, contemplating. Other times it means taking action.

The middle desk is mine. Miss Arndroy is questioning her way up the rows – putting names to faces. She is actually putting names to desks on a sheet of paper. She fills in our names on a diagram she has made of the room. Little Miss Organised. I recognise names. Some of them I had forgotten. Others I remember, but it is nice to get them confirmed. She looks at me to ask my name – and I see fear in her face. Her eyes are more frightened than the eyes of the majority of my classmates – children at the beginning of their first day in a big new school.

We kids take each day as a new experience, as a fraction of becoming whole, we learn. *She* sees each day as a challenge, a threat, a fraction of her life gone. I wonder at what age it is that a person changes from building themselves to falling apart.

"Axel. Axel Williams Miss." – Me.

I feel confident now. My days of hiding are over. I want people to know who I am so I use repetition to stress my existence. That little difference, saying my first name twice, is enough to separate myself from the crowd. Not the black sheep, the prophet – the one who sees more than grass and water – the little billy goat gruff, the ram. People I do not know yet notice me. And those who have met me before see me with my head held high. I have developed. If they once knew a humble Axel, they will have to change their perceptions. I am born again, the voyager who returns home, the old comrade back amongst the troops. My sentence is over from this minute on. I am ready for the future because I have stopped hiding from a ghostly past.

"Have you got any brothers in this school Axel?" – Miss A.

Ha. A classic attempt to gain superiority over me. I challenged her authority by giving my name my way. A retort straight from the teachers' guidebook to pupil dominance. I consider the options: further challenge her with an intelligent and aware answer and ever more be labelled as a "clever-clogs" (that is a pupil with a brain that can think for itself) or submit to her thrust with a yes or a no.

I have no desire to become known as mouthy, so I choose the latter option. However, I am sure I will eventually earn a similar nickname in that hideout of incapable leaders – the staff room.

"No. I haven't got any brothers or sisters at all, Miss." – Me.

My answer was slightly different to the one I planned. The extra words came as a natural addition. I do not want to be seen as a tamed animal. It is all right to show a little spirit. That second phrase allowed me to show the rest of 1R that I am not afraid of anything here. And it avoided causing Miss Arndroy anxiety – a useful neutral phrase.

The "Miss" was for me. It was my personal rebellion – there to satisfy my need to laugh at our pathetic tête-à-tête. I loved saying that word. In saying it I displayed servility – but I know that I feel no respect for her. Titles are the most wonderful words, you can use them to feign humility and disguise a knowledge of superiority at the same time. I will mimic the language of a slave for as long as I want to. It pacifies the lord and gives the serf strength within.

She has a timid, scarless, over-pampered face. I know she has never endured prolonged wet or cold skin. I have. I often forced myself to suffer atrocious weather during the in-between years. I see her weak hands lying on her large teacher's

desk and know that they have never held her hanging, full of bravado, from an untested tree branch twenty feet above paving slabs. And I imagine her feet, resting on the linoleum floor, have scarcely walked more difficult ground – ground like the wet, slippery, narrow paths on dangerously steep river valley sides that I have run along. Or the made-up routes I have threaded across shattered rocks lying beneath limestone cliffs. I let her think she has power over me. One of us knows the truth.

"Well I suppose there are a lot of Williamses in this school. Never mind." – Miss A.

She needs to have the last word. I do not. She is welcome to it. I do not need to openly challenge her, not yet.

There was a lion once, born in a zoo. Its mother died from internal haemorrhaging soon after the birth of her single cub. She was the only lioness in the zoo that could provide milk – and the cub needed a mother to rear it. The cub knew only hunger. The zookeepers knew the baby needed to be looked after.

One of the keepers at the zoo had a dog, a large bitch that had just given birth to a small litter – two pups. The zookeeper suggested that the cub should be given to his bitch to rear. The bitch accepted the cub and the adopted child fed on its new mother's milk. The pups accepted their half-sister because they knew nothing of hatred and discrimination – those are qualities that have to be learnt and developed.

While the cub grew she would do things wrong. She would instinctively act like a lion and not a dog. When she did that, the bitch would correct her. She would snap at her, or gently bite her, or knock her with her paw. The bitch did not want her natural offspring to copy the cub's behaviour – and act like lions. As well as that, the bitch felt that the baby lioness had a duty to act like a dog because she owed her life to one!

The cub disliked her treatment. She hated being snapped at and pawed. She resented getting more chastisement than her adopted siblings. She felt she was being picked on and she felt she was being made to behave unnaturally. Something inside her told her she was being led astray. But she knew that she was not strong enough to be able to challenge her mother.

When the baby lioness was old enough to survive on her own, she was taken back to the zoo. She liked the zoo far better than the zookeeper's house. In the zoo she was amongst fellow lions. But sometimes the lions teased her and laughed at her. They joked because sometimes she behaved like a dog. She hated them when they made fun of her – but more than that, she hated the bitch who had taught her to act in that way.

A few years later, the zookeeper who owned the bitch was due to leave the zoo. On his last day he decided to bring his pet to the zoo to see the lioness. He wanted to see if they would still recognise each other. One set of eyes looked admiringly at a grown child to which it had given life. The other set of eyes looked with hate at a parent who had abused it – and now roamed free while the sufferer did not.

The zookeeper misunderstood the locked-on gazes. He saw mutual admiration and decided to get the two creatures to meet more intimately. He wanted to see

how they would treat each other. He asked his mate, the man who ran the lion house, if it would be all right to put them together. The fellow zookeeper consented and the bitch and the lioness were let into a small pen together.

The bitch moved towards the lioness and they sniffed each other's breath. Then the bitch gave the lioness a lick of friendship. The lioness licked back – but as her tongue brushed under the bitch's weak jaw, she let one of her lower canines pierce the flesh beneath the bitch's foreign tongue. Her tooth slid easily through the body of an old, domesticated dog and, for a while, the bitch had an extra tooth in her mouth. The lioness pulled a little and let her weapon rip through the soft flesh of the animal which had once chid her.

The bitch howled through pain and despair and self-pity. Her eye looked straight into the eye that it had never looked into before. The eye said "I am me" and the bitch ran from the powerful beast that had hurt it. The zookeeper thought the cut was accidental – the animals both knew differently.

I look around some more at the kids I will get to know. They are looking around too and I feel that there is more interest in me than in anyone else. It is not just because I am sitting at the centre of the class, there is something else. I like it. I like feeling special again. For so long I have felt pathetic and beneath others. Now I feel good and worthy of attention. I am beginning to regain my self-respect. But not just my self-respect – more.

Registration is lasting a long time. Miss Arndroy tells us a hundred new pieces of information that make no sense and which in one week will become common knowledge to us all. There is a kid sitting next to the wall, two rows to my left, who keeps looking at me. I do not recognise him. The torture of having to sit and do nothing but listen to Miss Androy's tiresome voice may soon be over. She is telling us to sit at the same desks for registration until she has learnt all our names.

Yes. It is over. It is breaktime. We each have a timetable now and know what our first lesson will be. History. Study history, they say, and you won't repeat past mistakes. The bell rings. Out into the playground, the open part of the prison, the exercise yard.

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# CONVERSATION WITH JOE

"Hiya Axel. Long time no see." – Joe.

He always was a lover of clichés. Learning clichés and other people's opinions was always enough of a challenge for his none too great mind. A greeting that says nothing about how he feels is what I expected from Joe. He waits for others to tell him how he feels.

He is bigger now. I am bigger too. It has been over three years since we last met. His voice is breaking – it sounds strange. He has probably got quite a lot of pubic hair. He is an early developer. I wonder if he will be the first from our year at Hill to get laid? The quiet ones often are the first to have sex!

"All right Joe. How are you?" – Me.

"Not too bad. And you?" – Joe.

"Fine" – Me.

I pause to wait for something more from him. But I know that it is a wait in vain. He looks back at me with eyes that only half know me. Somewhere in his eyes there is fear. There is also some hate, and some love. There is no better feeling in the world than looking at someone and feeling love. I can see Joe's love for me and my skin has gone warm. I can feel my eyes glowing inwards and outwards. I sense a smile welcomingly appear on my face. A reunion with an old friend. I love life. I let my tense muscles relax and break the silence.

"It has been a long time Joe. And here we are hey – growing up. Big school. Back together again huh.

I've missed you." – Me.

"Really. But you left." – Joe.

"I didn't want to – believe me. I got taken away by my parents.

Anyway, that's all over now.

Do you ever think about what happened? Things went bad Joe – and I regret what happened so much. But I want to carry on with my life now – put it all behind me. I think I can." – Me.

"Yes. We agree Axel. We have to live with what happened. We must go on. It happened. It's over now." – Joe.

His words stumbled out of his mouth. His words – no, Eddy's or Richard's – or both. Or the Titans' words. No. They must have split up after the hanging. They must have. There is no way the Titans could have carried on. They would not have wanted to. They would not have been allowed to.

"So what have you been doing Joe? What happened at Hill after I left?" – Me.

"Well, you must know all about the interviews and everything. None of us saw each other during the summer. Lots of interviews. I suppose you got the same eh?" – Joe.

"Yes. Lots of interviews. Police in the house every day. Parents having to take time off work. Telling the same story over and over. I know all that. Go on." – Me.

I decide to sit down in preparation for a lot of old news. He sits next to me. We are sitting next to each other on the same block of concrete.

"Well, we went back to school. No-one spoke before assembly, we just wandered around like lost sheep. The bell went and we all went into assembly. But not to the same place – we were second year juniors. The head spoke about leaving bad things behind, getting over hurdles. We said prayers for Michael and



his family – and then prayers for all of us – and prayers for you too – and your family.

Miss Arks wasn't there – she left. Michael's parents were there and donated a cup to the school for the best overall on sports day. It is called the Michael Geniss Trophy. Eddy won it in the fourth year and we all cried.

Michael's younger brother will be a second year infant at Hill now." – Joe.

"I wish I'd never left Joe" – Me.

We look up at the yard and see others similar to us laughing, shouting, running, talking in groups of different sizes.

"We belong here now Joe. This is a new start – don't you think?" – Me.

"Yes" – Joe.

The sound of an electric bell applauds my sentiment and we both get up to go.

"I'll see you around Joe. I've got to know more – OK?" – Me.

"Yes, OK" – Joe.

History. I choose a desk next to the windows. I am sitting next to a huge square window out of which I can see the leisure centre, the leisure centre and the worn-out brown path that joins it to the school. Walkers stick to that path even though it may not be the perfect route between the two locations. They use the path and it becomes wider, more distinct, and used more.

A wandering dog may have bent the first blades of grass that laid down the route that it now follows. Or it may have been an old wobbly wheelbarrow pushed by a daydreaming gardener. Or it may have been the route that a child abuser took after molesting a young schoolgirl – to escape from policemen in pursuit. Whatever or whoever first trod that path, it is etched indelibly into the ground now and it is followed religiously by most travellers going to the leisure centre from the school and back again. Perhaps one day its route will be set in concrete, with steps to crown it, and exalted to the position of a pedestrian-only footpath. And bicycles will be banned from travelling over its sacred route.

That is what we people do – we take a meaningless trail and decide it is something of substance. We do not carry out research to see if this path was first used by a thief or a murderer or Satan. We just follow it, take it at face value and embody it into our heritage.

The lesson is about Romans. They built straight roads. Their roads had a specific purpose – to get straight to the point without deviation. They wanted to move as quickly as they could from one place to the next. They chose the simple way, the obvious way – and ignored all previous paths followed by barbarians who wandered aimlessly around the countryside.

They built towns too. They built their population centres with a purpose. The purpose was to house a certain number of soldiers and civilians; to provide particular services; to be defensible in the event of an attack. They did not let their cities grow and spread like mindless diseases – they planned. The Romans had a purpose for everything they did. Their clothes, uniforms and vehicles were designed to be efficient and meet certain requirements. Their short sword thrust its way ahead of the competition. The pilum, their spear, weighed down their opponents shields and could not be removed. I like learning about the Romans. They were orderly.

But even their empire crumbled.

We all have to draw a Roman soldier for homework. My scrawlings are always rubbish – so I will do something to make my Roman different. If he is not going to be the best, he will be the most interesting. I will give him something that no emperor ever could. I will give him his future. His future is the future of the empire – decay. I will draw rust on his sword, cracks in his armour and holes in his helmet and shield.

It is dinner and I am sitting opposite a fat kid whose favourite type of food is potato. I have swapped my roast potatoes for his beef and the boy sitting next to me is swapping his potatoes for the fat boy's pudding. I always thought it was too much pudding that makes someone fat! It must be the lack of a balanced diet that does it. Too much of any one thing seems to ruin a person. Too much luxury ruined the Roman Empire. Too much power caused Eddy's, and the Titans', downfall. Too much thinking makes my head hurt.

Pudding is rhubarb crumble and custard. I wish I had swapped my potatoes for the fat boy's pudding instead of his meat. I will know next time.

I want to find Joe. I need to know more about the last three years at Hill – at school and in the village. But it is raining, heavy rain – there is thunder too. I can picture sixth-formers running along that path to the leisure centre to spend their lunchtimes there. Their extra freedom is transformed into passing footsteps that reinforce a path's existence. I will never use that path. I will walk along the grass every time I go to the leisure centre. I will develop my own way.

I sit down in the assembly hall. It is full of chairs laid out in long rows – joined together and parallel to the front of the stage. I can see Joe talking to a kid from my form, the one who kept looking at me during registration.

"Hiya Joe" – me.

"Hi Axel.

This is Robin. He came to Hill after you left." – Joe.

"Hi" – Robin.

"All right" – Me.

"We reformed the Titans Axel." – Joe.

"What? You're joking! You couldn't have. They wouldn't of let you." – Me.

"Honest. No joke. Look, The Head left after Christmas – and we got a new guy, a lot younger – Mr Jones. He found out everything about what happened – and worked with me, Eddy and Richard after school to help us sort everything out. We called those evenings Titan discussion evenings – and after a while he said it would be a good idea to reform the Titans – but not to keep things secret like we had before. He said we had to face what happened, talk about it. He made the Titans into a project. It's part of the school now. The Titans meet once a week with Mr Jones – on a Wednesday straight after school. And they talk about the school, and how things are going, and about how everyone feels, or any problems or good things going on in the village. It is OK to want to grow up but it's better to do it under guidance and with the help of someone like Mr Jones. Adults know what is going on in your minds, they've been there, they can understand you. They can guide you.

Robin was the secretary for the Titans in the fourth year. He wrote to our local MP telling him all about what we did – and the MP came and visited us one Wednesday evening. And Mr Jones told him everything about us." – Joe.

"Yeah. He was told all about what happened with you lot and what we had done since. He said that we had coped with a sad occurrence admirably – and he congratulated us and Mr Jones on our work." – Robin.

"So was Eddy in charge Joe?" – Me.

"No. It was Lucy Weathers. Do you remember her Axel?

Eddy was vice chairman.

Lucy has gone to public school instead of coming here." – Joe.

"So Eddy is gonna to form a group here. It's gonna to be called the OTs – the Old Titans. We're gonna establish it here at Street – as a means of staying in contact with the teachers. It's in the planning stage at the moment – but we're gonna put it to the headmaster as soon as we've got all our ideas together." – Robin.

Is there such a thing as an original idea? Does anyone ever create anything new – or is each 'progressive' step just a bastardisation of preceding ones? Do we move forward or just mutate? We all change. But in what way do we change? And is there anything worse than being discarded when the rest of the world and people you know are changing?

I hated my time alone – but it is having been away from what happened to the Titans that makes me able to look objectively at this situation. All the original ideas I created and investigated have been sold out – and yet they still called themselves Titans – the name I thought up. The main principle behind its conception was to develop ideas without the interference of adults – those contaminated products of their own indoctrinated upbringings. We were to be the new wave – untainted by all the jumbled-up ideas that had been established before us. We were going to listen to what was said by Miss Arks, The Head, Mr Bourg and others – and decide what to make of their words, take nothing at face value – avoid control. But Eddy has taken the Titans to the wrong place. He has led them into the world that I tried to save them from. He has gone backwards. He has formed them into another part of the system, another offspring of a rotten society instead of a group of forward-thinking and aware individuals.

The Old Titans. That name is a joke. We were Titans because we were not young in spirit. What does Old Titans imply?

Perhaps the hanging was all part of Eddy's plan to discredit me. If it was, I respect his intellect a thousand times more than I ever did. The whole reason for the den and the rope swing could have been to give him a chance to frame me as a murderer – a permanent solution to my leadership challenge and a chance to remodel my principles. If he pre-planned all that, it must stand as the most masterful piece of manipulation of another man in human history.

Eddy is not that clever. I saw that the day he ran from Mr Bourg. He worries too much about his own fragile little life – concerns like not getting into trouble, being seen to perform properly, and succeeding. When we first met at Hill School he was my dangerous opponent. Things have changed now, been reversed. He has the power base this time and the glances he casts at me are troubled ones – ones

an old champion gives to the young challenger. I hold a sword in my hand and he has a sceptre. We have swapped props and, without question, a duel will soon take place.

"See you in science then Axel." – Robin.

"Yeah, OK" – Me.

Science. Bunsen burners. We are sitting on stools at long heavy desks with six at each desk. Each desk has got two Bunsen burners, two hoses and one flint lighter set out on it. The teacher tells us how to fix the hose to the tap and the burner to the hose. Now we are allowed to make those connections. It is not the most difficult puzzle in the world. The teacher comes round and checks to make sure all the taps on our benches are turned off and then he switches the gas on at the mains.

We all gather round to watch a demonstration at his desk of how to light a Bunsen burner. We fidget, impatient to return to our places and create our own hissing flames. Back to our desks. I take the lighter and make a spark to start the fire. It is alight. It is hot and intriguing.

"The hottest point is at the peak of the blue flame."

I always thought blue was a neutral colour – safe. Now it is linked with danger and superheat. I like science, it has turned my quiet blue eyes into flaming torches that could cut through steel. This small piece of knowledge has given my life a new dimension. No one colour is better than another – red or white rose; black or white bull; green or blue eyes. Blue can be as good as green, blue can be better. Scissors may cut paper but paper wraps stone and stone blunts scissors. A hot blue flame can melt scissors, burn paper and shatter stones. I am no longer jealous of Eddy's green eyes – or his anything. His eyes used to make me feel inferior. No longer.

Break-time and I am looking at myself in the cheap mirrors in the toilets. I see bold blue, daring blue, incisive blue eyes – the blue of the hottest flame. I can see danger in my own eyes now.

Woodwork. We are introduced to the tools.

"The best chisel is a sharp chisel" and "A strike with the mallet must be firm and precise". I have had enough for one day. I catch the bus home.

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# **ADVICE FROM RICHARD**

He's avoided me for weeks.

"Stay away from me, Axel." – Richard.

Those words anger me. "Stay away from..." Who on this earth has the right to tell any other man where he can go and who he can see? Is the whole world not ours? Are there any boundaries that naturally exist on this globe to indicate that certain persons may cross them and others may not? No. It is humankind in all their wisdom who have decided on immigration laws and put up "No Bikers Allowed" signs in pub windows. These things are written by men and women, not God.

No-one is going to tell me where I am allowed to go – or who I am allowed to see. If I die exercising my right to roam freely, then it will have been a cause worth dying for. It is the only cause worth dying for.

Richard has changed. We have all changed. But he has changed the most dramatically. Joe is still a bumbling giant – although a much gruffer one now. Eddy still appears to lust after power and I still think too much. But Richard, Richard has gone sour – like a carton of milk left open for weeks on a scrap heap. I wonder what strain of bacteria has caused Richard's decay? David has always had a great effect on Richard. Perhaps, after the hanging, an older brother's shame beat a younger brother's guilt into malice. The blacksmith always has an easier job when the metal is halfway to melting point. The softer the material, the more readily it can be shaped.

The trouble with Richard is he jumps rather than steps – he has always had to. Both his body and his character work that way – a leap to get away from danger, his brother, the past. I do not like what he has sprung into.

"What?" – Me.

"It was you Axel. You did it. I can't see how you managed to make out you were just carrying out Eddy's order. You knew it was a joke – and you still went on and killed that fucking kid. That poor little bastard. You evil little shit!

Put the frighteners on him, that was the idea. He was a gobby little kid and he needed putting in his place – not fucking hanging. Why? Was it part of a scheme to regain the power you once had over us when we were young and impressionable? That wouldn't surprise me Axel! Well don't bother trying again. Everyone's sussed you. And I don't want anything more to do with you. You never did anything for us – we were just there to boost your ego. I hope you've changed Axel. I hope to God you've changed. It would scare the shit out of me to know that there is an older version of that nasty little kid I once knew running around this place. I hope you've fucking changed.

I just wish you'd be honest. Admit it Axel – killing that kid was not what we wanted, not our idea. It was yours and yours only. Admit it. You took it too far. You, not us.

That's just it isn't it. I bet you've convinced yourself that it was all of our faults. You convinced the police – managed to make them all believe it was a child's game that got out of hand. Well, it wasn't. It was all your work. I reckon you had it all mapped out – the whole fucking thing! The loss of power to Eddy and then the attempt to frame a scandal on him so that you would be the victorious saviour, the deposed king who regains his throne after a messy civil war, the prime minister

who gets an overwhelming majority after saving the nation from an atrocity that was allowed to unfold.

Everyone bought it didn't they Axel. Everyone who needed to – the police, the teachers – even Michael's parents. But your parents didn't. They were always your problem weren't they? You, the independent freethinking kid, are the one with the domineering parents. It makes me smile, yeah smile, to think how you had to conjure up the Titans in order to feel free of them – and yet it was the Titans that gave them a reason to fuck you up even more. It serves you right for having such a perverse reason to create the Titans in the first place. You wanted to control others just like your parents control you.

I don't believe we were so easily led. Huh. That's a cliché on school reports isn't it? 'Easily led.' That's what teachers always say. I know we were young – but I still hate myself for having followed you, for getting mixed-up in your vicious little life.

I have learnt from you Axel. I've seen the dark side of human nature – and luckily I saw it when I was young. I only had eight years of belief in mankind smashed. I pity those who have twenty or more destroyed. Imagine the devastation of witnessing your first murder at fifty – half a century of shattered faith!

That's all it is Axel – belief and disbelief. Once I believed in my fellow men. Now I believe in looking after myself. I know that nobody gives a shit about me. In a strange way, I respect you a little Axel – for just that reason. You only ever cared about yourself – and your own imaginary but nevertheless dangerous dream world. Dangerous because your dreams were so important to you that you aimed to change the real world into your imaginary one. And in that imaginary world you were going to be the world leader weren't you! But not the president of the United Nations – more like general in charge of the United Secret Police. It would be marshal law with you as the commander-in-chief – living a life of luxury whilst millions starve. Torturing and executing your opposition.

Believe me Axel, you are nothing now – and nobody wants to know you. You were so lucky to get away with it all. I was in such a state of shock afterwards that I wasn't able to say all this then – to the police, the teachers, the parents. I wish I could have." – Richard.

"Always the jealous little second-in-command weren't you Rich, Dickie, Dick, Dick Head. Always playing second fiddle to me. To me – and then to your Eddy – and always to your maladjusted brother. And now you want to be strong, put down the guy who once made you do his running about, stuck you on sentry duty, gave you orders. Forget it Rich. If you think you've sussed me – well I know you better. You'll always fall in line because you've never had a strong character – you've got too used to hiding and dodging out of the way. With that kind of upbringing you'll never be able to walk first along a red carpet – through an alleyway of adoring fans. Don't kid yourself Rich – you are an 'easily led'. If anyone has to face up to anything – it's you. You must accept what you are Rich. You are OK at doing things – but only once you've been told what to do." – Me.

A long pause. Long. A pause that you feel sick in. A pause that feels like it will never end. Feels like you're falling. A huge intake of breath.

"Any fool can fight. Anyone can say nasty things. All I ever wanted was to help you Rich. I understood you. You're angry. Confused. Damaged. A damaged boy. You needed help in the old days with David. You need help now with this mess. With Eddy's insane plan. You don't want it. You want it to be over, to end. I've always been there for you Rich. And if you still want my help, it's still on offer. We all need help with our lives – and I am the best candidate to help you. I know what made you. I've always wanted to help you overcome your problems. Don't ignore them and turn into an unbalanced adult. Hey, if you don't want me in your life any more – that's your decision. But don't think that I'm going to live the life of a fucking monk because of something that happened when I was eight." – Me.

"Look Axel. You're right. I *don't* want it to happen again. I couldn't take it. Shit. I thought I had it sussed. I just don't know. I thought I did. Perhaps it was partly everyone's fault. It did get out of hand. That's why I want to stop anything similar happening again. It can't happen again Axel. Don't let it happen again." – Richard.

"OK Rich don't worry. Perhaps a lot of it was my fault. I promise you I never wanted anything like that to happen. I was as confused then as you are now. Things were happening too fast. The Titans became a charging horse and I had fallen out of the saddle – but my foot was in the stirrup. I got caught up, dragged along.

That kid. He just got in the way of a crazy horse. Nobody shot the horse because they didn't realise how unsafe it was. That is why I am surprised only a tranquilliser dart was used after it had trampled him down. Why not a real bullet Richard? It's on its feet again – and as soon as the drug has worn off it will be stampeding once more. We've got to stop it Rich. We know what it is capable of and it is our responsibility to put it down. It is the horse you are afraid of Rich, not me – or, for that matter, whoever happens to be on its back. The horse needs to die Rich – to put *us* out of our misery. Do you agree?" – Me.

"Yes Axel. You're right. I'm not happy still seeing the Titans parade around freely. I've boycotted the organisation since the fourth session with Mr Jones. I knew he was no more than a conjuror. He's raised the Titans from the grave – we must do something. We have to make our presence felt – get out there and warn the world.

They're having a meeting Axel – after school next Wednesday in the old mansion. Eddy has told lots of others about the Titans. He wants to introduce a similar organisation here. I've heard there's loads of First Years going along to see what he has to say. Axel – do you think we should go and warn them? Y'know, some sort of picket line. It's our duty Axel!" – Richard.

"No Rich. Not a pathetic two-man picket line with scrappy banners. But we must do something. He is recruiting, building up an army again. He never realised that the Titans should be a small group – he's such a fucking megalomaniac.

I'll think of something. Leave it to me – I'll do it alone – I've got to.

Go along though Rich. Turn up. I might need your support. But leave the action to me. I gave Eddy this idea about leading others, it's my job to stop him leading them astray. I've created a monster Rich – and only I know how to destroy it.

Yes. Go. I will come along on my own. I will fulfil my responsibility. Tell Eddy I'm coming. I want him to know. I don't need to surprise him. I'll beat him fair and



square, head-to-head – the meeting of the reigning champion and the previous titleholder. Leave it to me Rich, but go – and tell him that I'm coming. OK?" – Me.

"Yes. OK" – Richard.

"God. This beast needs to be put to rest. It's no good tethering it because it will gnaw through the rope. And it would find a weak link if we used chains to restrain it. And it would eventually escape from a cage if we imprisoned it.

I'll kill it – and then it won't be able to frighten you any more Rich. You will be able to walk safely in the woods. I will be St. George and this titanic dragon will perish on my lance. You can be my herald if you like Rich – announce my arrival. Because the good knight does not fear battle. I will enter that castle with my head high, my mission clear in my mind.

Leave it to me Rich. I will protect you and the rest of this small community by slaying the Minotaur. I don't know how I'll do it yet – but the Sphinx's riddle was solved – and the solution to this problem lies somewhere too. And even if, like Alexander, I have to apply Occam's razor to cut the Gordian knot – I will. I shan't carry a sword – but my mind is as sharp now as it has ever been. Sharper. I have learnt so much. And now that I am at one with myself again, I can, once again, act decisively – incisively.

The unicorn, the gryphon, the Gorgon, the kraken, the Cyclops and the manticore have died – now the Titans must too. I will be Jack the Giant Killer Rich – Jason, Theseus, Hercules, Oedipus. Trust me – and be my double agent. Play at Judas. Let him think I have other intentions. That can be your part in the plan. Use your knowledge of him to deceive him. Make him think that I come as someone other than the vet – the vet who will silence the rabid creature that terrorised our village. I need to be able to speak without being silenced. You must prepare the stage for the speech that will deliver a lethal shock to this worn-out pit pony." – Me.

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# MY THOUGHTS

The past. It is about as definite as the future. We all see the past differently – and our memories of it get distorted. Richard's past had been interfered with – I repaired the damage. The past changes continuously. Each forgotten detail alters the story – each half remembered fact, each guessed at link, each extra pinch of spice. Our past changes every minute. There are billions of different pasts and as many possible futures.

No, that is wrong. The future is more uncertain – both events and interpretations are unrestricted in the future. In the past events are set and only the descriptions of them differ. We must prepare for the future. When I look in the mirror recently I see someone who is anticipating the future. Being a Titan was about preparing. I am doing more than that now. I am doing more than planning. I am fixing the future in my head. I am predicting the future – moulding it. The Titans, or the OTs as Eddy calls the new organisation, is about to become a major force at Street. I will stop that happening.

Eddy stole my boat and has been sailing it blatantly around the estuary where I used to sail. He has become a good seaman and earned the respect of others. At the same time he has planned and built another boat. It is inspired by the design of my boat – the one he took from me. But it is very different to my original design. It is a lot bigger – and it is almost finished.

In place of the few pistols that my vessel carried to scare off pirates, this one has cannons. No, not old clumsy iron and wood antique cannons – anti-aircraft several thousand rounds a minute cannons and pintle-mounted machine guns and sea-to-air missiles and torpedoes and big guns and ballistic missiles with multiple nuclear warheads. He has built a battleship and he intends to recruit a team of sailors and marines to crew her – and one day he will sail her onto the Seven Seas.

Street School, the town, the world needs me to save them from him. They think that because the company of this vessel will only be eleven or so years old, it will be harmless. It may be harmless at first – but you do not have to be over eighteen to carry a rifle, to fight. (You do have to be over eighteen to watch pornographic films, drink or vote though!) Anyway, if it is ten years before this war-horse first charges into battle, that will mean her crew will have had ten years practise at their drills. And they will not be like every other crew that has its percentage of bewildered new recruits, overweight hangers-on, frightened refugees from society and wasters who could not survive elsewhere. They will be fit, young and committed.

Eddy wants to build up a force of highly trained and motivated followers. I need to stop him. It is worthwhile looking at history and studying the 'unstoppable' dictators. There must have been moments when someone could have terminated their rule – especially in their early days. Invincibility and the total domination of others take time to achieve. There must have been a time when Stalin was vulnerable – before he became a mass executioner. There must have been one who could have stood in his way. Was that man Leon Trotsky? Perhaps it was. But Trotsky did not have the brains, the forethought to put his foot in front of his scheming comrade. If Trotsky should have tripped up the genocidal Stalin – then I am the one who must throw Eddy to the ground. I will not let him do twenty years

of damage to this world before others eventually see him for what he is. I am not willing to wait for ten years of suffering before disillusioned disciples place a bomb under his table. I will not let the Titans become the new inquisitors

What I have not worked out yet is how to stop him. How? How to stop the snowball that is rolling downhill – growing larger and larger. Civil engineers around the world are continuously trying to stop things – avalanches, landslides, floods, water erosion, lava flows. I have to stop this potential natural disaster. But I only have my hands. How can they be enough when even the most primitive of man's structures used earth and wood and stone. Earth to hold back rivers, wood to keep storms at bay, stone to keep out the cold, stone to make dams, stone to build defences.

Eddy is like the urge that causes lemmings to plunge over cliffs. How can I stop an urge? What is an urge? A surge can be measured scientifically and, therefore, it can be controlled. A surge of electricity can be controlled using capacitors and earth leads. A surge of water rushing into a fractured hull can be stopped from sinking the ship by building the ship's hull in sealed compartments. But, like slight and light, surge and urge are two different words. A surge is something which is comprehensible, controllable. And slight is a word that means little. Take away one letter, a bent line, an 's' – and you have an innate, uncontrollable desire and the phenomena that gives rise to life on earth. But there is no need for me to tell you about words. You understand words. You understand the things I say – in words. And what is in a word? Only what you want to see. You interpret my story, my words. My words are guiding you, like road signs.

If you see a circular road sign with a thick red border and a white centre on which two numbers are painted in black – for example a 3 and a 0 (in that order), you may understand that there is a speed limitation of thirty miles per hour enforced on vehicles passing it. If you are driving a car and about to pass it and travel along the stretch of road past the sign, and you are travelling at forty miles per hour, you may decide to slow down. You may not. You may decide to break the law – or keep within it and travel with your speedometer registering just below thirty – or you may not fully trust your speedometer and choose to travel at twenty, just to be on the safe side – or you might decide to drive at exactly thirty to prove a point – or you could turn around and find a diversion because you hate driving at a slow speed or being over-controlled. The sign is there to control you or to help you depending on how you want to see it. Ignore it and you might spin off the road on a tight bend or hit a small child playing football on the tarmac trail ahead.

The police could arrest you if you ignore what is written – or interpret it wrongly. If a policeman or policewoman stop you for speeding in a controlled zone, I would be surprised if they let you off for claiming that you understood the sign to be an advert for thirty-piece red and white dinner services on sale in the oncoming village. We have to prove we understand road signs before we are allowed to drive unaided. The government ensures we understand its instructions.

My words are like road signs because they guide you – and a road without signs would make travelling extremely difficult. It is possible to journey without signs – but they help us. They help us make sense of our wanderings.

But road signs have only one intended meaning. Road signs are too precise, too this or that, too right or wrong. The words in my story are different. You are free to form your own interpretation of them. My words are replaceable approximations. You are free to perceive everything I say in your own way. When I say cabbage, you might think of a Savoy with bubbled leaves or a spring green with greenfly or a large white cabbage. You could see it pickled or boiled, chopped or in leaves. I do not want my words to be definite, fixed, rigid. I want my words to cater to your desires. See my scenes through your own eyes. Make your own judgments about my friends and enemies. I am describing this in precise detail because I want you to be able to understand the likes of Eddy, I want to save you from people like him – the child who has caused me so much pain. I want to protect you from the suffering I experienced. I want you to see the world as it is – and understand Eddy. Eddy is everywhere – or his types are. Understand him, learn, help yourself to my wisdom, use my pain.

I have peered into Eddy's mind, and looked behind me and seen it there too. It has been above and below me and it scared me. I was so scared I thought I was trapped. But I was not. I struggled for release and I got out. I want to share my frightening experience with you, to help you. This is not my story, it is Eddy's. I may tell my story one day – but at the moment this one is more important.

If, by the end of this, you have learnt something about the nature of an evil man – I will be happy. I will have achieved my aim.

Evil is all about us, festering and fermenting inside all sorts of craniums – head-shaped compost bins made of bone. I lifted the lid off one particularly stinking, diseased container and I was sucked in. But because I was strong and did not blame myself for being so foolish, I was able to crawl out again without being infected with sin, corrupted. I escaped.

Now it is my duty to tell you what was in there so that you can know how to resist its magnetic pull and ignore its foul smell and prevent the insects and mould within it spreading into your garden and beyond. I am not trying to tell you that only a few bins are full of muck and disease and that the millions of others are full of sweet bouquets. Bins have shit in them – that is what they are for. Eddy is a bin – full of rotting vegetation, stale fish, used needles and broken bottles. But most people are not bins. Most people are houses, buildings full of rooms with different characters – each full of life and love. Most people are these types of structures – homes – shells that contain all manner of objects and inhabitants. They are different colours and have insides and outsides. However similar they may look, no two houses are the same. Most have functioning toilets, some do not. Some are in a good state of repair, some are crumbling. Some are simple, some are lavish. All are there for one purpose. A house stands to let life carry on.

A compost bin is there to let old vegetables and wilting flowers decay together. Eddy collects worn-out ideas and putrefies them. He is the compost bin that believes that all life should be rotting – he has grown to enjoy watching decay. He wants to see the whole world shrivel and die. I want to stop him. Stopping someone, as I said earlier, can be difficult.

It is not too hard to stop traffic if you wear the uniform of a member of the police force. The police can stop someone who wants to go straight on – and hold

them there or divert them. An assassin can stop a politician from making a speech by pulling a trigger. The trigger causes a small piece of metal to fly through the air at high velocity. If that piece of metal collides with a chest protected by no more than a few layers of cotton or nylon, and then bursts through the heart – the blood supply to the politician's brain is cut-off and the politician shuts up. A rapist who attacks victims at night can stop women from leaving their homes after the sun has set. The desire of a man to eject his sperm into the vagina of a woman he sees walking alone at night can stop women doing just that.

There are many things I can do to stop my bedside lamp from working. Here are just a few: remove the bulb; cut the wire between the plug and the lamp; remove the fuse from the plug; remove the light circuit fuse from the fuse box or cut-off the power supply by flicking the main switch next to the fuse box. Or smash the bulb.

I do not know how to stop Eddy. He has a following now. Others have clambered on board his battleship, many more are considering joining up. Everyone wants to serve under a great admiral. I have to show them that he is incompetent. I have to show them that his vessel is a danger to all other shipping. I need to discredit Eddy, not destroy him.

How do you discredit someone? How does one person discredit another? What can I do to make the crowd who currently worship Eddy's word alter their behaviour? How can I let them see the demon behind his well-crafted human face and honest green eyes?

I feel like a newspaper editor who has to decide whether or not to run a story that might end in a court case. I know it is my duty to stop Eddy. No-one else can. God has put me on this earth to stop Eddy – and God has tested my resolve – and God has made me strong and wise. I will stop Eddy.

A parable.

A man moved from the city to live in the country. His new nearby neighbour made a living by growing watercress in the river that ran past their houses. The neighbour had also encouraged the two other families along the riverbank to do the same. The man from the city decided to join in with the local business.

The new arrival coped well with the task of growing watercress and soon grew more ambitious. He was used to rapid growth! He had grown up amongst buildings and industries that developed quickly and expanded and extended their range of products. So he went to his bank manager and arranged a loan.

With the loan he bought a huge amount of land upstream from his house. He cleared the land and levelled it. He built dams and irrigation systems to flood the land. Then he built houses above the waterlogged area and divided the marsh into plots.

Once he had done all that, he advertised in the city for people to move to his homes in the countryside and buy land to farm watercress on. The adverts spoke of the beauty of the natural way of life and the noise and hectic nature of life in the city. He let his houses to the people who took up his offer and sold his flooded fields to them at great profit. They farmed and he organised the packaging and transportation of their watercress. He sold it in the city for them and made profit on that enterprise too.

The original three producers found it difficult to compete with the more efficient watercress producers upstream. So, the man who had originally started growing watercress turned away from the river to dry land – and, to his surprise, he found it to be extremely fertile. He grew all types of vegetables and fruit and found no difficulty selling his crops.

The other two however, the ones who he had once advised to grow watercress, were afraid to try something new. They felt safe growing watercress because they knew they were good at it. They overcame their financial difficulties by selling their watercress to the man who had come from the city to their valley to live. His price was not as good as the one they once got but selling it to him cut overheads. It also left them with more time to spend on their crop which meant they could grow more. He bought their crop and they got enough money to live on.

As the years went by, things changed – things do! Fashions, cultural influences, understandings, opinions and laws change. The city grew tired of watercress. Restaurant owners used it less in their menus, children no longer wanted it in their sandwiches – they wanted lettuce instead. A new greenhouse complex was built near the city and it produced an abundance of lettuces. The city changed its mind about what leaves it preferred with its salads.

The price dropped. People would only buy watercress if it was cheap. Too much was being produced. As the price dropped, the people who relied solely on growing it to survive grew poorer. But they kept on growing because they could – and the man who understood the city promised them that its inhabitants would grow tired of lettuce. He said the desire for lettuce would never last because it was pale in comparison to watercress and had less flavour and goodness.

I will let you finish off this parable for yourself. Everyone owned land, and the land was rich – ideal for many crops. And the land was close to a huge river that would always provide water. If you cannot create an ending for that story – perhaps following the rest of my story might help. My story, my story about Eddy. My story about intimidation and control and breaking free and living your life your own way.

Next Wednesday, after school, Eddy is having his meeting, his rally. I need to be there to expose his power-crazed intentions. Like the neighbour who knows that the future does not lie with watercress, I need to convince others that this leader is not acting in their best interests and is unconcerned with their well-being.

Now I have a real mission.

At the age of eight I was preparing myself for a great future, designing myself, building myself into a new type of man ready to stare society in the eyes and challenge it. Eddy destroyed my self-confidence and, before I can start again from where he cut me off, I need to expose him. I need to prevent him from doing the same thing to others – pissing on their hopes.

My past has forced me down. I was involved in a murder. I will never again be able to look people in the eye and feel as good as or better than them. Fuck me. Eddy was clever. Clever Eddy, evil Eddy, Eddy the devil. How can I ever become a leader of men again? I will always be seen as a killer. Clever Eddy. I had so much potential. The bastard!

But there is a way to emerge again as a great man. I must be an ordinary member of the population who acts courageously – a true hero. Everyone loves

heroes. I will get recognised. I must speak their language, use their clichés, and earn their respect. And when a man is needed to stand up, and none dare, I will stand up. I will stand up and walk forward and they will follow me.

Perhaps God bought Eddy into my life to teach what it was like to be an ordinary person. I had taught myself so much and proved to God that I was worthy of his duty. So he completed my education. He made me suffer. He gave me experiences that would break a normal man. And I survived. Justified his faith in me. Now I have a steadfast will to add to my qualities. I am in a better position to rise above the masses. I understand what it is like to be at the bottom, to feel pain, to be mortal. I am the fallen one, the underdog. My beliefs have changed. I am closer to those I will lead one day.

Lucifer was tricked into bringing Eddy to Hill and I have benefited from meeting him. Now The Prince of Darkness will have to live with the fact that he helped God make me strong.

Wednesday. Not far away now. Reachable. Getting closer. I feel like a cloud being drawn across the sky to a drought-ridden area. Each day pulls me closer. I roll on, by the light of the sun and the moon and the stars, towards cracked soil and brown-leafed trees. I will make the land green again, true green – the green of chlorophyll, plant life – not the green of false promise that Eddy has in his eyes.

We had a cat once. It had green eyes. My parents thought its eyes were beautiful, they always talked about them. One day I watched it eat a mouse, head first. It crunched the tiny bones with awkward movements of its jaws and it gulped down mouthfuls of warm flesh, fur and innards. It looked up and saw me and I saw its eyes – and then the tail disappeared down its throat. And it walked off, smug, happy and full.

Later that day I found the mouse it had eaten. The cat had been sick – overeating probably. It did not need its extra meal and its stomach had thrown the mouse out. I looked at the sick, a foul-smelling trail of chewed-up mouse, and I saw what the cat had used to make itself sick – a few thick blades of bright green grass. The same grass that cows eat to provide us with the fresh white milk we all love to see appear on our doorsteps, had made our cat vomit mouse. The streaks of green ran comically through the grey and red furry mush lying on our drive. Green may support life, but it can also cause sickness.

One day our cat disappeared. About a week later a woman from the village found its body in the forest when she was walking her dog. She said it had been savaged by a fox and crows had picked out its eyes. Mum took me with her to collect its corpse. The crows had got there before us – its eyes were missing. Crows are obviously unafraid of green eyes. We buried it.

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# A DREAM

I had a dream once. It was full of colours. It started black.

There was black, nothingness, emptiness – and then there was some green – only a small bit at first. If everything my eyes could see was black and darkness all around then the green was just a little blob somewhere in that whole black everywhere. I focused in on the green because it was there and because it was something. As I looked at it and concentrated on it, it grew and it came closer to me – or I was drawn closer to it. And then I was sucked into it or it enveloped me and where there was once nothing there was now something and that whatever was all around me. I plucked up the courage to look left and right – and it was there too. So I looked behind me and it was there too. When the green was all about me I felt comfortable, secure, at home, happy. As I bathed in the green and turned and wallowed in its loveliness I noticed that it was not all the same tone. There were strips of yellow in it shaped like twisting, eternally long spider plant leaves with no end or beginning. Because the yellow was different it caught my attention and I concentrated on it. It fascinated me. I looked closer and soon realised that it surrounded me and the green was gone. I looked for the green but it was not there so I made myself forget about it and accepted the yellow. But the yellow became white and the white made me open my eyes so wide that they filled with water and I could feel the creases on my forehead folding against each other like freshly laundered sheets being piled-up for collection. The white was the most incredible of the colours, I could feel it on every part of my body. It triggered every sensory nerve in my skin and was closer to me than any of the other colours had been – and it extended further away from me too. I could feel it inside me, washing all the sin from my brain and cholesterol from my circulatory system and filth from my lungs. And I could see it reaching beyond everywhere that could ever be. But my eyes grew tired of the brightness so I shut them. And through my eyelids the white looked red. I wanted the white back because the red meant too many things. But my eyelids were stuck together and I could not open them – so I shut them more tightly instead. I shut them more powerfully than the most powerful hydraulically sealed door that mankind has ever made or ever will make can be shut. I wanted the white back, but more than that I wanted to stop seeing red. My plan half worked. As I felt the billions of tonnes of pressure that my eyelids were producing, the red was crushed into blue. But the blue was cold and uninteresting and I noticed how silent everything was. I felt alone again and all was black. So I searched and I searched for some colour. And I searched – in vain.

That is why I have always loved the colour green and hated blue. Green was my gateway to the light and blue introduced me to blackness, emptiness, brought me back to loneliness.

But I am not sure now if it is that simple. Green can lie, cause sickness, deceive. Perhaps, if I try to look at the dream differently, I can come to another conclusion about its significance. Green was the bait, the piece of stale cheese that lured me into the trap. The colourful roller-coaster ride that I thought was a path leading away from hunger and emptiness to salvation, was a nightmare trip into Hell. It was a Netherworld where the light is so bright that it strips you to the bone, removes your very being and leaves you bare of humanity. The white was not redemption – it was torture.

In the black I knew where I was. I was me. I could be myself because there were no distractions. In the black I felt like me and I was me and I understood myself. In the white I knew nothing of myself because everywhere was so wonderful and everything was too fantastic. I lost myself. I was nothing. I shut my eyes because it was terrible and I shut them harder until I returned to that comforting emptiness where I could be me again. And the blue was the welcoming herald that returned me to my body and sanity.

Next time I have this dream, if I ever have it again, I will stay in the black and ignore any green. Perhaps I will try to pick out bits of blue at times, just for interest, to break the monotony. But I will do no more than that. I hate being lost.

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# THE TYRANT

My story will be over soon. I can feel it. I also feel a bit guilty for going on in the way I have at times. It has not been my intention to distract you. I want my story to engage you, keep you hooked. I want you to reach the end, the resolution. That has always been my goal – to get to the point, to finish, to clear up, to conclude. But now that I am close to it I feel different. I want this story to go on and on because I am afraid of what the end means to me. I have so much to say – and so little time left now.

When I read a book I always look at the end first – not at the words, just at the page number. I like to know how many pages I have to read to get there, to the end. And, by simple division, I work out what page number will mark halfway. I always seem to take ages to reach halfway and then, after that, the page numbers advance faster and faster. When I am within the last ten pages, if I am really enjoying the story, I wish the book was longer and I hope that I have got the wrong final page number in my head – so I quickly check. But I am always right because before then I have already confirmed it several times along the way.

Knowing when the end is going to come spoils some of the suspense element of a story. It is like knowing what time a film on television will end – you can look at your watch and know that the hero is going to have been defeated or, more likely, be victorious within three minutes. I assure you, the knowledge that my own story is going to end soon is far worse than just sacrificing the element of suspense. I will get there soon. You will get there too I hope. The meeting is tonight.

An ordinary day. Not an ordinary day. I am in the kitchen, sitting down. I am pouring milk on my cereal – just like I have been doing for so many mornings. The milk is solid. It is a column of white joining my cereal-filled white bowl to a half full bottle. My hand is wrapped around the clear bottle. A hand, my hand, is suspending a clear glass, half full, white smeared bottle a few inches above the kitchen table. The table is Formica – I think. It has a brown and orange many star-shaped pattern and one of the corners of it is chipped. The chip reveals a light brown underneath. That light brown is chipboard, not Formica.

My feet are in tatty Christmas slippers. I accept whatever slippers I am given at Christmas because I am young. I am not self-conscious enough to want to change them. Someone else chooses them for me and they become as much a part of me as the hand that is holding the bottle. The back of my hand, the one I should know so well, is in front of me – about twelve inches from my face.

I cannot draw my hand unless I am looking at it all the time – so I can only draw my left hand. I cannot draw from memory. My memory holds no pictures. So I do not know the back of my hand at all. The instant I look away from it I forget what it looks like.

I know what my slippers look like. I can describe them. They are purple shiny plastic – made to look vaguely like leather. One day these slippers will fall apart and I will walk around in socks or bare feet for a while, waiting for Christmas. It will not bother me because I hate slippers – they are too much trouble. When I have a pair of slippers though, I generally wear them. It would be silly not to.

I can feel my feet. The tips of my big toe and the toe next to it on my left foot are colder than the rest of my toes. There is a hole in my left slipper and they are

exposed to the cold morning air. The purple exterior has been cut through and the white insulating material underneath has been worn through – so has the grey fluffy slipper lining. If I look at that slipper now, I will be able to see a bit of my big toe and the toe next to it – and some of the hard black plastic sole beneath. If I curl my toes up I will be able to see more of the sole.

When I am barefoot I feel the kitchen carpet beneath my feet as I sit here for breakfast. With these slippers on I do not. The carpet is still there, beneath my feet, I just cannot feel it at the moment. I am wearing my pyjamas and a dressing gown Dad bought abroad. They were Christmas presents too. I have never really thought this until now – but if Jesus had never been born I would have to go to breakfast naked! This is not Christmas day. This is the day of Eddy's campaign gathering. This is Campaign Day.

Now I am walking, dressed for Campaign Day. The road beneath my black leather shoes is drying out its covering of morning dew. The tarmac is grey on top where the sun has already removed the moisture. But just beneath the surface, the tarmac is black where the wetness still holds out.

It is so, so quiet. I can hear my feet thumping their way along the road. I am looking at my feet and the grey socks and black trousers that connect them to my body. And I am looking ahead along the well know strip of dark and light grey road that I walk along to get to Street Comprehensive.

It may not be that quiet – there are many other things going on – but I am just listening to my feet and watching them create grey and black patterns to the steady beat of black plastic on a crushed-stone surface. I do not want to look too far forward yet. I will look up when I get to school. I need to keep things simple at the moment – cut out possible distractions. I must concentrate, meditate.

Thump, thump, thump, thump. Head rocking slightly from side to side. Thinking. Feet moving slowly, under control. Breathing. In through the nose, out of the nose. Slowly. In control. Eyes blink, let it happen – not too often. No need to overdo it. Breathing and thumping en route to school.

"Hiya Axel" – Sarah.

"Did you see ... Yes, it scared the shit out of me when ... No ... Have you got any .. OK! OK! ... Hi ... Oh all right, but I'm ... Give us one ... Haha ... Quiet please ... really ... she wouldn't ... why ... I SAID QUIET." – 1R and Miss A.

She is in a worse state now than she ever was. She always looked a mess and got confused about simple things – now she looks worse, more disorganised – she gets thrown more easily. I look at poor Miss A and I wonder whether her life has been falling to pieces since she started teaching – or if she just gets worse as the school year goes on and then uses the summer break to pull herself back up to the miserable state she was in when she first met us in the assembly hall.

She has convinced herself that she loves children – and that she is doing them a favour by preparing them for adult life. In reality she hates kids. She hates us because we all have the potential to be somebody – she never had that opportunity. She is an ugly little girl with too much intelligence to ever forget about her appearance and not enough ability to succeed in any particular field.

"Axel" – Miss A.

"Present Miss" – Me.

My catchphrase. My joke. My feigned respect. My imitated inferiority. The tone of my voice tells her and the class that I am faking. I show everyone what I think of her. I am past showing pity for anyone. I have seen what pity does – nothing. There are winners and losers in this world. She is a loser and no amount of mercy will make her stronger. I might as well be honest with her, let her see for herself what she really is. It is better for her if I do. I would not be doing her any favours by letting her hide away from reality.

She hates me more than any of the others. She hates me more because I know what she is. The others just see her as a teacher who has no control over whatever class is in front of her. I see her as a shy girl who only has two friends, other girls like her – unpopular ones. In school she was one of a small group of girls – the odd ones who would never speak to boys. She still struggles to converse with the other sex. She became a teacher because it offered her an opportunity to mix with both sexes.

Now she can talk to boys, the boys in her classes – but only by becoming someone else – the teacher. She finds it hard to play that part – especially amongst the other teachers. She rarely speaks in the staffroom. When she does the words are all forced, unemotional. The only person she ever has real conversations with now, conversations about living and feeling, is Naty. Naty is short for Natalie – and Natalie was the doll she was given for her third birthday. Miss A still has Naty. Naty sits on her own white wicker chair by Miss A's bed. Naty is made of rags.

"It is all set for after school today Axel. Loads of kids are going – mostly First Years. I've heard some of them say that lots of kids are interested to hear what he has to say. They think it is a new and exciting idea to form a big organisation of kids Axel. Eddy's said that the OT society will bridge the gap between young and old. He's said that the gang will cut out sixty percent of the suffering in the world. I know he's not right Axel. You've got to do something. You must stop this going on. I don't want another death Axel. I don't know what's happening but it doesn't feel right. Have you made a plan Axel? What are we going to do?" – Richard.

"OK Calm down Rich. Look, stay away from me today. I have got to prepare myself for the meeting. I will expose him – don't worry. Eddy is doing the wrong thing Rich. I'll sort it out." – Me.

I take hold of Richard's shoulders with my hands. I feel the tension in his muscles. I feel the hardwearing material of his charcoal-grey blazer and I watch it crease up under the pressure from my hands. Folds appear between my fingers, folds of near black.

"Richard – leave me alone today." – Me.

I look at his face and see eyes open wider as his face relaxes. The muscles in his cheeks stop pulling his features closer together. His eyes look at me like the eyes of a child who has just woken from a horrible nightmare and discovered that it was only a dream and that the world is reassuringly normal – beautiful even.

"The Titans should have ended the day we hung that kid. We were young and we didn't know what we were doing. It was a game that went too far. Yes, a game in which our original intentions were noble.

But the most horrific of events can start with games. Our game turned nasty and we should have ended it. It wasn't ended. Today, later today, it will end. I started it Rich. I started all this that summer in Hill. I will end it Rich. It is my duty.

If we let things just keep on running without questioning them, we start thinking they must be right. That is what has happened with the Titans. Eddy thinks it is a just organisation – he thinks he has found all the answers. Well, luckily, I have been able to get away from it all for a few years Rich. I have seen other things. And now I can see how miserable the Titans' values are. It takes an outsider to question a system Rich. I am that. And I am also the only one who really understands The Tyrant.

Eddy will be deposed tonight Rich. His rule will end and his kingdom will be dissolved. Leave it to me. I know what must be done. Leave me now Richard. Leave me to work things out and perfect my speech. Today the mighty oppressor will fall and the people will be able to live their lives free of fear.

Leave me now Richard. Go to the meeting and proclaim my coming. OK?" – Me.

"Yes Axel. Yes.

I'll see you later." – Richard.

I am sitting alone. Lunchtime. I am alone after quickly eating bacon flan with chips and tinned tomatoes and chocolate sponge with chocolate sauce for pudding. I leave before seconds because I want to be on my own. I am on my own now, sitting on one of the grass banks by the rugby pitches.

Crowds. The world has billions of crowds. Some of them are here. One crowd is playing football, there are crowds of people talking. There may be a crowd around a fight later.

Individuals too. There are individuals walking around. And pairs or threes. Pairs and threes cannot be regarded as crowds.

Eddy would like to unite all these people under his banner. He would like to mould them into a following, a throng. Eddy will not be happy until everyone wandering around Street Comprehensive's grounds believes in him. And when everyone here believes in him he will not be happy until everyone in the town and then the rest of the world follows suit.

Hmm. Follows suit, club on club. That is what he wants – and those that do not – club, club those who refuse to join the club. Beat the unbelievers with wood, or cut them open with metal or blow them apart with explosions.

If I manage to stop Eddy today, nobody in the future will say that on such a day at such a time Axel Williams saved the earth. If I fail to stop Eddy today, in the future people suffering under his rule will think 'I wonder if there was someone once who could have stopped this bastard?' I will not let it get to that. I will stop Eddy.

Eddy, strong and clever. If I was Eddy, what would I do? Yes, that is the best way to approach the problem. I must think like him, become him. A bell. What has that got to do with Eddy? Ringing. EddyEddyEddyEddy. Shit. The end of lunch, lunch-break to be precise.

Eddyeddyeddyeddyeddyeddyeddyeddyeddy.



The bell ringing again. The end of the school day. The bell telling Eddy's followers to gather.

I am going to make my way there now – like everyone else. But I am going to move slowly. I am going to collect my thoughts. I am going to prepare myself – sort things out in my mind – practise my speech – forget the past – understand my mission – fulfil my destiny – know my task. Others pass me. I do not need to move fast – I do not want to. They are full of excitement. I am not joining them because I want to – I am going there because I must. I will not be pushed or dragged along physically or emotionally. I will get to the mansion in my own time.

What will Eddy be doing at this moment? He will have been the first there – he will have learnt from the mistake he made on the operation against Mr Bourg. I bet he even got off school early and was at the mansion before the bell rang out his name. How is this being allowed to go ahead? How can a meeting called by a twelve year-old in an abandoned building a mile from school ever be sanctioned, supported by teachers? They must know it is going ahead.

And the next step is going to be establishing the Titans at Street. What do the teachers think is going on? They must have heard about the Titans. There is probably an extensive report on its history that has gone around the staffroom at least once. What could their interest in the Titans be? Mr Jones seems to have re-established the Titans to cure the psychological trauma that Eddy and Joe and Richard and the others felt after the hanging. But that is long gone now. It needs to be forgotten. Why are adults still letting the Titans carry on?

At the moment the Titans are only half being allowed to continue – a semi-secretive meeting after school. If they had any balls the teachers would let Eddy have use of the assembly hall. But that would be too risky – to even temporarily give a twelve year-old their seat of power. They do not realise that letting this meeting go on is the same as actively supporting it. It is the duty of everyone to stand against evil. To do nothing has the same effect as siding with it. "If you are not with me you are against me." My quote might not be word perfect, but it has the right sentiment. I am with God. He is with me. I will stand against evil.

The only reason I can find for the teachers' failure to end Eddy's movement is that they want it to succeed. Teachers are the powerless intellectuals of society. They are the middle-of-the-road thinkers who have as much influence over society as the police have over the development of criminality. The teachers must see a better future under Eddy's command. Eddy ordered the death of the little shit who defecated in a public place, by a stream. Eddy executed a sinner – a future poisoner of water supplies and desecrator of churches. Eddy did exactly what many teachers would love to do – he removed a cancer from society as soon as it had been diagnosed. For years teachers have had to let the malignant filth they see passing through their classes live on and cause a life time of pain to others.

Our society protects the individual – gives the individual rights, no matter how sick they are. We treat terrorists as human beings, and murderers and thieves as hotel guests. We respect the right to live of every rapist, child molester, murderer and anarchist which our caring population has accidentally borne. Eddy offers a new way. To him people are cattle who have to be controlled, herded. He is a farmer now and he has learnt how to deal with livestock. He will break the neck of

a chicken that pecks at eggs. And a week later he will feed its maggot-ridden corpse back to the others for their scorn.

The teachers, the intellectuals completely trapped by whatever ideology is dictated, have had enough. They want change and they have seen how to achieve it. At last they will have an important part to play in the shaping of the world. They have been pushed around too much and long mourned their shrivelling status. Eddy will be their first real prodigy. They will help raise the beast and then hope for a better lot in his realm. They are his apostles. When he is exalted, Eddy will recognise the work they do because of what they have done for him.

I feel so alone at the moment. I have so little support for what I must do. He who stands against the giant often stands alone. Goliath was slain in a one-on-one contest. He who confronts the monster usually has no other men by his side. Perseus destroyed Medusa single-handed (with some help from Athena). I have God and perhaps Richard and Joe on my side. God will be my strength because I am his servant. I will defeat this creature.

I want to think like Eddy for a moment, just a moment. My steady steps are drawing me closer to the old building that is trying to regain its old importance. The mansion is a monolith standing for a bygone era, its values are dated. Eddy's Titanic values are not even that – they are wrong and they should be ignored, deserted like the mansion has been.

I must think like Eddy. I am on the final path now. The gravelled track we use at the beginning of each cross-country lesson leads straight ahead. My story will come to an end at the end of it. I want it to end now – but I must go on. I hope the end will be a beginning too – a new beginning, a brighter future, a step in the right direction. I must think like Eddy for a minute.

I was brought up in a city and I hated it there – but I learnt. I learnt that nothing is ever given away – you have to work for it. If you want to achieve you have to graft. Some people are born in more fortunate positions than others – but it is up to each person to make what they want of their own life.

I was not born into a wealthy family. I was not born into a poor one. In the city I saw people that belong to both groups. For as long as I can remember, I was aware that there were both more and less fortunate people brushing past my shoulders.

In the countryside, where I now live, I have seen the opportunity to create life. Farmers create life – they grow crops and they allow animals to breed. They introduce order and purpose into the lives of sheep and cattle. Farmers are superior beings to these creatures – they give them a reason to be and they protect them during their lives. These men represent the pinnacle of human achievement. I will make a success of my life. I will rise above the crowds and be one of the great winners, the farmers. I have the ability to manipulate and I can control others like a great equestrian controls his steed. I am the marvellous puppeteer whose manikins are real men and women. I am he who can pull the strings of fate, cause bodies to hang from a thread or fall to the depths of everlasting torment.

I have grown tired of watching miserable, unguided insects crawl all over our great Mother Earth and tear pieces from her beautiful skin and dig their claws into

each other. The time has come for a new order – for men like myself to step above the scurrying, self-obsessed swarms. Follow me and you will reap the benefits of taking shelter under my wings. For when I rise to the heavens, and remould the farcical values that you think you have created in the name of God for the good of man – those who found comfort in my shadow will be rewarded for their fine judgment.

Your charade of democracy and law and morality is as twisted as the slimy trail that humankind has traced over this earth for the last few thousand years. And it is about to be replaced. I will discard the effluence that has come from Homo sapiens' desire to destroy others and protect itself. I will create a system where people have a purpose. The purpose will be to serve me – and others like me who may emerge. Those who serve will be rewarded but those who cause injury to others of my flock will be punished.

"I was not born into a wealthy family – I was not born into a poor one. But in my life I have seen people that belong to both of these groups. For as long as I can remember I have been aware that there have been people both more and less fortunate than me brushing past my shoulders.

We do not have to put up with this unfair system. We do not have to believe that some will succeed and some will fail. We do not have to believe that some people are always right and others will always act wrongly. I have made mistakes. I made a terrible mistake. One day a joke of mine was misunderstood – and the result was that a young lad who should be alive today is not. But Michael did not lose his life in vain. From his misfortune great ideas have sprouted. We can learn from our mistakes – we can learn from our lives.

I have asked you here today to talk about just that – learning.

We all go to Street Comprehensive – and we are all there to be educated. But, thanks to current trends in the education system, this tuition is moving gradually towards a situation where we need to learn no more than facts to pass exams. During my time at Hill school, after the death of Mike, I and others, spent a lot of time discussing this predicament.

The people who govern this country have absolved themselves from the responsibility of properly educating the likes of us. They let us grow and develop our own sets of values and then employ mercenaries to punish us if we do not follow theirs. They are distancing themselves from the crowds, from us – and there is only one group of people who will help us – us.

I was involved with a group at my last school. We called ourselves the Titans – in the honour of the life of young Mike. We wanted to show that good could come from a tragedy. I want to form a similar organisation, the Old Titans, here at Street. I have mentioned it to Mr Enby – and next week I am going to have a meeting with the headmaster to talk about it. But first I want to find out what level of support there is here amongst you.

Are you interested in getting the Old Titans established here at Street? Do you want to become involved in your own education? Do you want to be taught about life and not just trained to do somebody else's job?

The OT society cares for every individual. It aims to help young people grow into well-rounded adults, adults who are aware of what is right and wrong. The OT

society, if it becomes established here, will give everyone a chance to understand the world around them – an opportunity that is currently denied to a large percentage of the population of this country. Only when you know why we live together in towns and all over the countryside, can you contribute to society – help it work.

That's all I have to say. I have asked you all to come here because I wanted you to hear about the Old Titans first. Thank you for listening. If you are interested in supporting the OT movement, then please sign this sheet of paper before you leave. I will take it to the headmaster when I have my meeting with him next week and I will be able to use it to show him how much interest there is. The more names I get, the more likely he is to be swayed.

But before that, does anyone have any questions?" – Eddy.

"Yes. Why are you such a fucking liar?" – Me.

I doubt you were very surprised to hear the sentiment of my first comment. The tone might have shocked you a little! It may not have been the ideal opening remark – but it said what I wanted to say. All the heads are looking at me now and my voice is echoing around the unfurnished room. I have been noticed. The end justified the means. It has worked.

I am looking into Eddy's eyes. I can see them clearly. We are at opposite sides of an old, empty room. We are face-to-face – the first time in over three years. He has changed. He is not the boy who ran away from Mr Bourg. He is not the inexperienced leader who ordered the hanging of a little boy several summers ago. He is a competent politician, a trainee world leader/world ruler.

His face is less round, his cheeks have been pulled in to cover his larger head. His hair is longer and he has a fringe that hangs an inch above his eyes. The hair disguises the childish protruding ears and the fringe guides you straight into his eyes. His eyes are brighter – lit up by desire and ambition. They look false. They remind me of green glowing Christmas tree bulbs.

His expression is a new one too. I think it is showing disgust. He thinks I am not one of his kind, a lesser being. He even places me below his followers. No, I am not one of his kind. I have not sold my soul. No, I am not one of his followers. I can see his worm-infested thoughts lying at the bottom of his ugly skull.

I am looking at Eddy. I do not need to look around me. I have already observed the setting. A battleground. As different and as similar as every place that men have selected for fighting throughout history. This room is our boxing ring and we are standing in our corners – hearts beating adrenalin-doped blood around our ready bodies. Our minds are set to combat mode. We wait for the bell, the signal to box. Two armies facing each other across the chosen stretch of land. Men prepared for battle, sword or gun or spear in hand. A shield each too, or a Kevlar helmet or body armour. Feet that were aching after days of walking can no longer be felt. Each steamy puff of breathed out air is a few grains of sand slipping through the slim neck of an hourglass – the imaginary timepiece in the commander's heart that tells him when to signal the attack.

Two politicians – on opposite sides of parliament – at a table on a television debate – sitting in their offices reading files on each other's lives.

"What do you mean Axel?" – Eddy.

The tone, the tone, the fucking tone of that statement. The bell ringing in my ear. I am locked in the belfry and some fucking idiot is ringing the bell. I am trapped like a pig in a lorry parked outside an abattoir.

"Eddy. You know what I mean – but this lot don't. The Titans was about growing up freely. I was in the Titans. I started the fucking Titans – I know.

We took it too far. We got as far as setting up a legal system – and we found someone guilty of breaking our *elevated* laws. The Titans killed a little boy. The organisation should have been stopped then. It wasn't. It has got to stop now.

Don't listen to this conniving bastard. Go home. We'll all grow up one day – if we try to rush it we will get it wrong. We don't know enough about life yet – wait, one day you all will.

Just go home!" – Me.

I breathe in, a deep breath. My whole body feels weak. Why does adrenalin make me feel weak? It should make me feel strong. What if I have to fight! Another deep breath. A slow deliberate blink, to clear my eyes.

"You obviously haven't been listening. You've got it wrong Axel. You've always done that – got things wrong. Misunderstood! Well that's your problem. If you ever sort yourself out – then you're welcome to join the OTs.

Hello everyone. Please ignore that interruption. Nothing has changed. That guy at the back is a bit disturbed. He was the one who hung little Mike and he hasn't managed to come to terms with what happened yet.

Anyone who has any questions, please come and see me now or at any time in school. Do come and sign if you are interested in the OT movement. It has nothing to do with what our token heckler is ranting and raving about. I am not lying, honesty is my foremost policy. Thank you." – Eddy.

"Bollocks.

Honesty – you don't know what that word means.

You stole my idea. The Titans. My idea.

I wanted to help a few people deal with a crazy world. A few friends. I let you join – took you in as a friend. You cheated me Eddy. You stabbed me in the fucking back.

Forget this shit. Leave it now. Titans – Old Titans. It's a load of crazy ideas. It'll make the world madder – not saner." – Me.

"Just go please Axel" – Eddy.

He's coming towards me. He's stepped down off his marble platform, come off his throne. He's at ground level now and he's stopped. He was on a dais, now he's on the floor. The crowd that was between us is no longer between us. The heads that turned around to look at me have now moved – parted.

There is a way through that flesh sea now. It's drawn back to provide a corridor for the two champions, chosen warriors.

"There is a time Eddy, when men are forced to admit their sins – face the truth after living a lie. Your time has come Eddy, you have had your day and I am your dusk. I was your dawn and now I am your goodnight Eddy. Believe in me and you will have peace. Accept your mistake and I shall give you sweet sleep, free of nightmares."

"You're off your fucking box Axel. Fuck off. Go on, get out o'here. Go. JUST GO!"

"Eddy. Come on. You know I am right. I will go – but you must go first. It is over. Leave."

"Nooooooo."

He's running towards me. I've got to make a quick decision. He's running. My moment now. Time's disappearing. I can see flames in his eyes. Green flames from burning plastic. In his hand. A stick, metal. A rusty steel rod. A sceptre, a trident, a flame. He's got fire in his hand and he wants to incinerate my already tortured soul. I must be quick now. Flame. What can hold back flame? Wood – no. No. There must be something.

The answer's at my feet – a gift from God. A large stone. Stone doesn't burn. At the centre of the earth, where Mephistopheles has set up home, stone burns. But here, where his influence is weaker, on earth, between Hell and Heaven – normality reigns here. The stone at my feet will hold back the heat – protect me!

I am watching both my hands grasp the stone. My fingers clasp it like a gryphon's claws. My eagle eyes see every detail of its cold, hard nature – the strain on my knuckles and tendons shows as I lift this multimillion year-old piece of sea bed – a piece of sea bed that once before witnessed the battle of two great beasts.

The wings on my taut, curved back pull up my shoulders and once again our eyes meet. There is little distance between us now and little time. But in that little space I place my barrier. His raging fire strikes my wall of ice – and the blaze is dampened. Eddy's face has just collided with the stone that I shoved into it.

He ran to me because he knew he had lost the battle. He finally respected me as his superior and begged that I might be the one to execute him in all his shame. Amidst his disappointment I saw true regret and granted him his wish, showed him mercy – for I am the executioner, the solution, the resolution of all difficulties, the answer to all questions.

In front of me now I can see a grey stone. Grey, a mixture of black and white, loneliness and comfort, faith and despair. My muscles provided the force that caused a piece of rock to move. That's all people do – move things around during their lives and deposit them in different places. We tickle the earth's tummy, eat from it and shit it elsewhere. Eventually we leave a pile of substances in a box in a hole in the ground or ask a cremator to separate them into smoke and ash.

Eddy had to be stopped. He'd have caused more harm than any man has ever caused. Pain. Lots of pain.

He's lying now a few feet in front of my feet. His body is twitching. Lucifer is struggling to keep his body alive. His injury is not fatal. Not yet. His nose is slashed badly – split like an over-ripe tomato cut with the jagged top of a rusty tin can. The blood seeping out is a wonderful red – and really thick. Thick like tomato sauce and oozing out of the dirty wound like old runny grease pouring out of a loose joint as fresh grease is pumped in at a nearby nipple.

His forehead is grazed in a couple of places. The flesh has been removed to reveal what is underneath – a mishmash of microscopic blood vessels – some

damaged and leaking slightly. His eyes are shut. He probably shut them as my stone of destiny heralded an end to his evil plans.

I can't let Eddy live. If he recovers he will revive the Titans again. I can't let that happen. It's my duty to stop him. The crowds around me are frozen. Their silent support gives me the reassurance I need. I kneel before the vanquished foe and I want the rock to rise again. My muscles comply with the demand. It is above me. I feel my triceps and deltoids stiffen in anticipation of the next task.

With the truth and the support of God I will bring these few pounds of hard judgment down on Eddy's cranium – I want his skull to split open so that the wickedness inside will be released and can return to Hades.

I can see the stone in my hands. I can see my hands holding the stone.

I remember seeing my hands before now – that is how I know the backs of my hands, we are old acquaintances. I saw them this morning holding a bottle half full of milk. I saw them a few years ago holding a rope and a boy – and then putting them together and swinging the lad over a stream. I saw them on my first day at Hill school – clasped together for prayer. I saw them lifting a bale of straw by the string; sliding up a young girl's naked thighs; throwing stones at fish.

They are holding a bigger stone now.

The stone is colliding with Eddy's face just above his left eye. I feel it bounce a bit in my hands and his blood is flying everywhere like sparks from a sparkler. But it smells nicer than that. It smells sweeter. Blood has filled the air. A private fountain. But the colour is more beautiful. And warm. The feel of it splashing against my face is more lovely than letting soft mud squidge through my bare toes. I want it again. I lift the stone and slam it once more against Eddy's head. And again. And again. Enough. I let the stone rest in my lap.

His head has changed. It is no longer his head. The devil has deserted his pupil – left this poor boy to God's mercy. I have broken the puppet. He is no longer possessed. He is cleansed. He is just a limp, soiled body with a soggy red swede at the top of a shuddering neck and shoulders. I have eroded his features and driven away the devil.

But the violence of my exorcism has opened his eyes – and they are still alive. Their fire must also be quenched. They are glowing like green cat's-eyes reflecting light on a cold winter's night. I put my weapon down and, like I did once before, I prise out the cat's green eyes with my right thumb. It's a lovely feeling and a rewarding job. Now his face is featureless. It's over – Eddy's life, my story.

I pick up the stone and stand. I'm standing with a chunk of rock in my hands. I hold it like a precious egg. The last dodo's egg. It is a phoenix's egg. I have a phoenix in my hands. The fire has raged and been extinguished and from the ashes a new life shall begin. Five hundred better years lie ahead. I have ended an era of torture and persecution.

When a knight won his spurs in the stories of old, He was gentle and brave he was gallant and bold; With a shield on his arm and a lance in his hand For God and for valour he rode through the land. No charger have I, and no sword by my side, Yet still to adventure and battle I ride, Though back into storyland giants have fled, And the knight are no more and the dragons are dead.

Let faith be my shield and let joy be my steed 'Gainst the dragons of anger,  
the ogres of greed; And let me set free, with the sword of my youth, From the  
castle of darkness the power of the truth.

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**NOT THE END**

I tear open my suture-crisscrossed chest, reveal my vulnerable, infected heart and you wonder why I sing that at the end? Why conclude with a primary schoolchildren's hymn? Because it wasn't the end, was it. It was Eddy's end – but not mine. I'm looking back over 20 years now. I've gone on. And I want to *move* on.

But I've been held back. Held in suspended animation. Forced to tread water. I'm tired. And the water I'm trapped in stinks because it isn't moving. I want a fresh beginning. Do I not deserve that? I've been honest with you – brutally honest – because you hold the key to my future. I'm wallowing in festering memories, pinned down by the heavy anchor of forced regurgitation. Only your judgement can slice the rope that binds me.

Of course I realise I wasn't holding a phoenix egg. I'm not delusional. It was a rock. A bludgeon. The most crude of all weapons. The tool of the Neanderthal. But you wanted to know what I thought back then. In the moment. I took you there. And it's not a pleasant place to be. That hymn brings me back to the here and now. It's a bridge. I need a solid, dependable, recognisable walkway for that journey. Something that connects my misguided past to my limbo-like present.

Now I'm back, it's my turn to ask you something. The boy makes the man. That's nonsense isn't it? Look me in the eyes. Read my furrowed brow. Hear the haunting regret in my tortured voice. Have I not served sufficient penance? Do I not deserve a fresh start?

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## Author's scrawl

I abhor well-trodden paths. You have to follow in the footsteps of others. Repeat their mistakes. Copying successful predecessors does have advantages. The path with leaves trod black leads to proven sources of reward and sustenance. If I'd been more willing to take advice and seek guidance on my literary journey, this book (or something quite similar), might have been published in the early 90s. But this popular success strategy has one major disadvantage. You don't tread new ground. And the path-followers ignore a simple truth: far more ground remains untrod than trod. That's the territory I find more rewarding.

I wrote *The Titans* in 1991 whilst based with the British Army at the Maze Prison in Northern Ireland. An international publisher loved it – but wanted changes. Young[er] and headstrong, I refused. Six months later they wanted to know if I'd changed my mind. Still young[ish], still headstrong, I hadn't.

Was I right to hold out? Should I have kept this novel locked in a dark cupboard while I waited for the democratic age of ebook self-publishing to dawn? An age that, back then, I and most others had no idea was coming. If this novel motivates you to make online public comment (good or bad), [email](#) me a link to your review and I'll send you a pdf of my essay on writing and publishing *The Titans*.

You can also like [The Titans](#) on Facebook, and visit Facebook pages for *My Goat Ate Its Own Legs*, *A damaged boy*, *Outstared by a Bullfrog* and *Fedw*.

Thanks for your interest in my writing,

Alex Burrett

## **Other works by Alex Burrett**

My Goat Ate Its Own Legs – 30 tales for adults.

A damaged boy – 45 short to medium pieces of fiction for grown-ups.

Outstared by a Bullfrog – a novel for grown-ups.

Fedw – a collection of poems.

## **Personal web page**

<http://www.alexburrett.com>

**Buy a UK edition of [My Goat Ate Its Own Legs](#) for free delivery anywhere in the world.**

## **Follow Alex Burrett on Quora**

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**Outstared an animal? Upload your picture and story here:**

<http://www.outstared.com>

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# EPILOGUE

The crab wrote until it discovered its problem. It hated all other crabs, nothing else. And it grew hungry. So it found a large rock pool and systematically killed every crab in it. It feasted on their flesh for weeks. It made that pool its home and devoured any crab that dared to wander into it. When there was no crab flesh and it was hungry, it would go out hunting. Perhaps one day it will move out into the open sea.

The bitch was still in the cage because the zookeepers did not dare go near. The lioness approached it. Afraid for her life, the bitch snapped at the lioness's face. The lioness bit back and her huge bite removed the bitch's throat. The zookeepers could do nothing but watch. The lioness licked up the oozing blood and then smiled a lion's smile at the dog's owner, lips painted with revenge.

The man who had come from the city killed his neighbour by smashing his head in with a huge rock. He disposed of the body by throwing it into the river. He then married his neighbour's widow and gained ownership of her land. He used the united land to grow fruit and vegetables which he sold to the people in his properties at city prices. They were poor and found it difficult to buy food and pay their rent – so he bought their land off them and turned it into paddy fields and then employed them as labourers to grow rice. The rice grew extremely well. He founded a business to process it and then sold it in the city along with fruit and vegetables.

The two men who continued to grow watercress sank into terrible debt and needed money to stay alive. The man from the city bought their land and added it to his estate. He employed them as labourers on his enlarged farm. He became a very successful man. A lot of people looked up to him. He was an achiever. He did well. Very well.

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