

Date: Monday, 11.12.06

**Location: Marchington, somewhere
North of Leeds**

Today's Enemy: The Grand Prix

After teaching there for a day, I rushed home to begin writing. It was a therapeutic attempt to remain sane by getting my angst onto paper. A few paragraphs of smoking biro later, I realised that I was in the extremely unusual position of teaching across the entire age range, from Year 1 to Year 11, and across the complete range of schools, from village primary schools where the kids go home on ponies, to inner-city Comprehensives where the kids go home in police cars, and sometimes even stolen police cars.

There is no red carpet treatment when a supply teacher arrives at a school, no smell of fresh paint, no eccentric members of staff conveniently 'off sick' and no children in awe of six headed Ofsted inspectors who have the power to turn them into frog spawn. We see the school for what it is; carbuncles, fistulas, bursting pus-erupting pustules, melanomas and all. We are the invisible force that keeps education on its feet in this country, or at least on its knees. What is the condition of State education in England today? Well, if it was a house, it would be an early Victorian terrace in need of gutting.

Marchington High School. A communist enclave some forty years behind Estonia. Before Marchington, I had seen my job as belonging to the sixth circle of hell but I was wrong, I had only

been operating somewhere around the first or second.

It was a poor start, the doors were locked and I was forced to stand with a cluster of fourteen-year-olds who were chewing over Saturday night's Malibu party.

'Natalie said nobody liked her, so she swallowed a handful of garlic capsules.'

'Cool.'

'Yeah. What happened?'

'She was sick in her mum's wardrobe.'

I tapped on the window at a geezer in a boiler suit who gestured either that I was about to enter a whirlpool of dissatisfaction or that the staff entrance was round the back. He disappeared anyway and I carried on waiting while the kids tried to make an impression of me in the door. Finally, a moribund caretaker appeared with a fat bunch of keys and I was pushed in.

When you are a supply teacher everyday is like the first day at school. You know nothing and bewilderment is the regular condition. I was carried down the labyrinth of passages on a river of pubescence and dumped like silt outside the office of the school secretary.

School secretaries resemble a benign aunt but I'm not fooled anymore because these women are omnipresent and omniscient. They know everybody and everything, from the workings of the latest quantum photocopier to the zeitgeist psychological methodology employed in dealing with the adolescent. Today though, she can do nothing about the power cuts which mean that the school is without heat and light. Quite common apparently, which is ironic as the school is only fifty metres away from a belching power station. At least it explains the staff's predilection for fleeces and, in one case, a commando-type ski mask.

The kids, however, provide no clue concerning the unpredictable heating system, for them it is cotton shirted business as usual because in their heads they are not hacked off teenagers in a harsh northern climate, they are beach bums with hard kerbs, grey pavements and skateboards in place of white sand, blue waves and surfboards.

‘Ah, Mister Erm. You are teaching English. Elizabeth will take you there.’

Elizabeth was between forty and sixty and of average build and height. Her hair was straight and shoulder length and had once been as black as a beagle’s lungs, but now only a few dark strands remained threaded through the grey as a reminder that she was once young too. Elizabeth wore the teacher’s uniform of fleece (in her case, lilac) and scarf (red) pulled up to her cold, purple, broken veined nose. Regrettably, I was dressed for a temperate climate. If I’d known that the conditions were going to be extreme I could have worn the salopettes that lingered from a one-off ski trip. She had another teacher uniform on, too - her eyes told the real story, panda eyes, with so many bags under them that it looked as though she was wearing two miniature cinema curtains. It’s been said that you can tell the how many years a teacher has been in the profession by the number of circles under their eyes.

‘Are you pleased to see me, or is that a hand warmer in your pocket?’ She may have said it in the days before laughter was prohibited.

‘This way,’ she mumbled from underneath her scarf. ‘I’ll show you the staff room.’

I followed her through a series of corridors that were so dark that I almost expected her to pluck a straw torch off the wall. Staff rooms are places where the concept of interior design is

unknown. This one was a particularly good example. A long, baronial style table ran down the centre of the room, piled high with a K2 of paper and a heap of curious detritus which included a genuine tin hat from World War II. If I'd delved deeper I'm sure I would have found the poor sod to whom it once belonged.

Deeper still and I would unearth cannons, sabres, pikestaffs, short swords, spears, shields, cudgels, clubs and all the other teaching paraphernalia. That table was a neat representation of the inner workings of the teachers' addled heads. It was Turner Prize material. An installation symbolising the scream for help from the downtrodden middle classes. Elizabeth quickly abandoned me for her clique, perhaps supposing that I would receive my instructions through osmosis or divine revelation. I decided not to make a nuisance of myself by asking her trivia such as who and where will I be teaching, and besides, she was busy extricating a first world war greatcoat from the table.

Usually in these situations, I try to look productive by writing a letter or making up a limerick or sketching, but the cold was getting to me and my hands were shaking. Earnest Shackleton eat your frozen heart out. This morning, I was content to just observe my fellow professionals as they prepared to go over the top yet again, faces drawn and the tension palpable. They looked hoary and battle fatigued and long overdue relief. One character was particularly intriguing. From the front, he looked scarily conventional with his attire of tweed jacket, collar and tie but when he turned around it was like, 'Hey, don't try and pigeon hole me,' as his wispy grey ponytail flapped and flicked all the way down his back.

The really disturbing aspect though was the lack of anyone under fifty. (Apart from one young woman who was already showing early signs of bloom loss. I almost called out to her,

‘Run for Christ’s sake, before you wither on the vine! I’ll hold them back. Go! Don’t worry about me, I’m done for already.’)

I can observe at leisure, for the supply teacher is not just a stranger but actually invisible. I can sit in the midst of a group of teachers and remain unseen because I simply do not exist within their frame of reference. It’s not their fault, though, most of them can’t see through the fog of depression that permeates the staff room. So I monitor and note the assorted mannerisms and ticks and clicks of the teeth and tongue and twitches and jerks and sharp staccato movements and blinks and rapid robotic nods of the head and marvel at the contemporary ballet created by accumulative stress.

The school secretary (or S.S., hmm) arrives now and pins a large sheet of paper to the wall denoting who will be covering for whom. The teachers rise as one body and peer at the sheet like A-Level students on results day, heaving groans of anguish or sighs of relief depending on the outcome.

Eventually, after walking for miles through the gloomy labyrinth I stumble into an empty, frozen, classroom with towering ceilings, ancient sash windows, flaking paintwork and knackered, sad furniture. At least I’m not in a portacabin. Whenever I find myself heading towards a peripheral portacabin, I experience the same visceral feeling that the French aristocrats had when they rode the tumbrels to Madame Guillotine.

Usually, the work set is related to the next exam that the class will be setting. Today, there is nothing. I prefer it this way because my lessons are designed for survival in that they are differentiated by ability, which means the kids can make the work as hard or as easy as they want. For example, I begin by saying that I often teach in a ‘Special School’ (this gets the attention of the girls) and that last week I was working with a

boy who was born with no eyes (this gets the attention of the boys.) I mention that the blind boy asked me what 'red' was and I told him buses, lips, apples, peppers, fire, tomatoes. He tells me that he's never seen any of those things and that red to him is the sound of a trumpet. I explain that his interpretation is abstract and human emotions are also abstract.

I ask if anyone can say what makes them angry. All hands go up now, mostly related to sibling angst, with a sadistic step-dad anecdote thrown in too, which I quash before finding myself in social worker territory. Next, we have a competition to see how many things they can name that are red, then green, then blue, and then yellow and I write them on the board. Finally, I hand out a sheet of plain paper and explain that they have a choice; they can either copy out the words on the board and illustrate the sheet with the items (no brainer) or write a poem concentrating on one colour and once again illustrating it. I have used the lesson a thousand times, much like a northern comedian tells the same joke touring the clubs. It always works, but today it will not see action, because Elizabeth the panda has re-appeared from behind the eucalyptus trees.

'Mr. Erm. You should be next door. *Jane Eyre*,' she says, thrusting a battered copy at me. 'Read that to them.'

Now when a matador enters a bullring he at least has a cape for protection yet I am expected to teach a Year 10 class armed only with a beat up copy of *Jane Eyre* which is hardly a substitute. I stand outside the door knowing they are in there waiting. I recognise the feeling, it's so familiar, a mix of fear and dread as the heart begins to pump adrenalin into the system, making ready for fight or flight. Unlike the cave man, I am not in a position to fight nor financially for flight.

Consequently, the adrenalin will not be used. Instead, it will be

stored in my ever-hardening arteries. I can hear the noise coming from inside. The sort of stir that caused various body fluids to stream from the Christians prior to facing five famished tigers and a barbarous Scythian wielding the jawbone of an ox. Like the Christians, I pray that I have still have a modicum of presence after twenty years of combat. After all, I am six feet four and looking particularly smart in a bright orange Versace shirt (ten pounds from Oxfam, shh) with dark blue suit and red silk tie embroidered with a seasonal ‘Merry Christmas.’

I push open the door and the scene is a TV movie featuring a Bronx High School where the kids sit on desks sharpening chair legs with flick-knives. My presence is ineffectual. Maybe I really am invisible. I am mentally entertaining myself with the advantages of being invisible when the very apologetic panda arrives. I am in the wrong classroom again. A few minutes later, I enter the correct classroom with my metaphorical fists flailing ready to let them know just who the hell has the strongest smelling piss round here. My build up of adrenaline is wasted though as this particular class are quite docile.

‘*Jane Eyre*. We are and must be one and all burdened with faults in this world but the time will soon come when I trust we shall put them of in putting off our corruptible bodies; when debasement and sin will fall from us with this cumbrous frame of flesh and only the spark of the spirit will remain the impalpable principle of life and thought pure as when it left the Creator to inspire the creature...aaaarghhh!’ I feel like I’m in the movie *Speed*. If I stop reading *Jane Eyre*, a fifty-pound bomb will go off.

Break time and back to the staff room to watch the pony-tailed one gnaw on a frozen pork pie, the steam of his breath creating the illusion that it is piping hot. Coffee is served from a trolley

along with greasy sausage rolls and crisps: teenage junk food. The ancients clap their hands to force heat into their extremities. I remain standing as the factions have already formed and are linked like chain mail against any possible intrusion from a member of another department or worse, a complete unknown, and potential virus.

I reckon it all started going down the chute when crockery was abolished in the school canteens and the teachers found themselves eating off plastic trays with custard from the dessert dimple slopping over the gravy groove. The government must then have thought, 'shit, if they will stand for that, they will stand for anything, put their pay on hold and run down the infrastructure until it rots.'

'But what if they complain, sir?'

'Then let them eat their cake with a plastic spoon.'

I am just about to delve into the rubble pile on the table to examine a canubic jar when a wild-eyed woman lunges towards me.

'It's you,' she says. 'St. Boswells High, twenty years ago.'

God, it's Maggie. Madder than ever. She must be nearly seventy.

'I should be retired,' she says. 'But my fecking daughter is pregnant again with no man.'

I assume she means that her daughter's pregnancy is the result of a brief fling but you never know with mad Maggie, it could be a pronouncement of the second coming. I could respond but there is no point. Maggie speaks at the speed of an Uzi sub-machine gun but never listens to a word in reply. You could tell her that you had just been gang bugged by aliens and she would respond with a story about her hamster chewing the curtains. It turns out that she is now the drama teacher here,

which causes me to have a flashback. Maggie continues to mow me down but - cue the harp music and wavy lines - I am now in Grayson College in Leeds, recalling the day when I was asked to teach the same subject.

I am in the drama 'suite', a room that could be used as an aircraft hangar for a jumbo jet. I feel dangerously small and I have never taught drama in my life. I look around the hangar, looking for clues on how to teach the Stanislavsky method, but there is more chance of finding a joystick and some landing gear. The breezeblock stadium of darkness is bare apart from a dozen plastic chairs, which will soon gain in importance. The lessons are an hour and a half, the length of a football match. Two minutes to nine. What will the first class be like? Will they be cool like James Dean? Will there be a Dustin Hoffman type who believes in getting into role? A Marilyn, who, though gorgeous to look at, has difficulty with her lines? A laconic Bogart oozing with presence? A young smouldering Brando ready to turn it on when required? A dangerous Jack Nicholson? A grinning Tom Cruise? Hey, this could be good. Nine o'clock and the doors rupture. All shapes and sizes make their entrance stage left, stage right and stage middle. A rich ethnic mix from Hollywood to Bollywood.

'It's another one,' yells a huge West Indian girl. 'We get a new mother every week.'

Fifteen boys and twelve girls take up their positions for a rerun of *Grand Prix*, with the girls taking on the role of ululating crowd and the boys climbing into their throbbing racing cars for ten laps of Monaco.

The flag is raised and they are off. Pushing the plastic chairs backwards now with their feet, the screech of metal on concrete is ear splitting and the crowd scream for their champion. One

circuit of the hangar complete, the screech of tyres, the smell of burning rubber, feet ramming the floor pedals, travelling anti-clockwise, in reverse, like my whole world is in freefall. I look at my watch: 9.05am. Just another one hour twenty-five minutes to go. Round they go again for the second lap. Chair number six appears to be in the lead but only just from chair number ten who is trying to cut inside him on the tight bend. Chair number seven is coming up fast, thighs bulging, and trainers smoking. Lap three and chair number six is going round the outside. Shit! He's not going to make it. Over and over he tumbles and the plastic works model chair slams heavily into the breeze block. Miraculously he's up on his feet. A little dazed but that's all and he gets right back in the seat. It's the only way, if you don't get right back on, you could lose your nerve and never be able to push a chair at speed around a drama studio again.

My brain is shrieking at me. The pain has penetrated and I have to make a choice. I can run out of the double doors or I can bring down the chequered flag. The first option is tasty but I take the second. I run onto the track and stop the race. There is a massive protest but to no purpose, the race is stopped and I begin to shout at 120 decibels and just fall short of calling them a pack of bastards. I tell them to stand against the wall so I can keep an eye on them. I don't want anyone behind me. They shuffle over to the breezeblock, some drag their chairs and sit on them and that's fine.

I tell them who I am. They are not impressed but I tell them anyway.

The shouting has the effect of pumping me up to three or four times my normal size but I am using all of my strength just to keep a lid on this one. I can feel gaskets popping. If I stop talking, I'm dead. I tell them to form a circle and then before

they become a collective conscience again I have them running and weaving in and out of it. The big West Indian girl will not have it though. She stands at the back with her arms folded across her chest making sucking noises with her teeth. I don't blame her, it is beneath her dignity to move faster than walking pace. I put the others into groups and give them ten minutes to work out a routine that will create a machine from their individual staccato movements. They get involved, they are even giggling, and the large girl taps her foot in the corner.

'Ok, let me see what you have come up with.'

The first three efforts are begrudgingly delivered but the fourth group seem keen, one boy and three girls. The girls form a pyramid while the boy executes a series of Arab springs before bouncing over the top of them. It isn't exactly what I asked for but it sure is spectacular.

I look at my watch. The hands of time are frozen. I am already mentally and physically deranged and there is still over an hour of the lesson left. I organize them into groups again and try some relay racing. The drama lesson is quickly taking on the look of a PE session but who cares, they are still involved, apart from the West Indian girl who when asked to perform a squat thrust, a star jump and five press ups gives me an extra strong suck and folds her arms ever tighter.

Forty minutes left, they are warmed up now and I have to keep them from getting back on the race track. One or two already look twitchy and have given the accelerator a quick thrust to test my reaction.

'Form another circle. We are going to pretend to pass a ball to each other, first the ball is made of glass, don't drop it. This time the ball is made of lead and you can hardly lift it, brilliant, now as light as a feather, excellent.'

Meanwhile, I am writing a list of activities on pieces of scrap paper. Window cleaning, kite flying, dog walking, pancake making, anything, for one to mime and the others to guess. It works, another ten minutes have passed, twenty to go. The West Indian girl has disappeared.

‘You have all seen soap operas. I want you to spend ten minutes working out a scene from your favourite one where someone has gone missing. Spread out, discuss and rehearse and then perform it.’

The results are not brilliant, mostly concerning scenes of ultra violence and extreme anger, but they have made an effort and I thank them. They don’t hear me though and with a shout of ‘wanker!’ they are gone and I am slumped against the ropes in the knowledge that in ten minutes I will have to do it all again with a different group.

At lunchtime I found a pub and drank two pints of beer and smoked four cigarettes. Food, I could not stomach, for I knew that soon I would have to do it all again for another one and half hours.

For the final lesson of the day, I am asked to support the media studies teacher. She looks wrecked beyond repair and has the panda eyes associated with the profession. I watch in growing sadness as she goes through her lesson. The kids don’t even bother to remove their coats. For the next hour, they talk amongst themselves and generally arse around while she carries on with her lesson as if she is addressing twelve attentive pupils at Winchester Public School. At the end of the lesson, I ask her what effect such lessons have on her personality.

‘I have no personality,’ she says, staring through and past me.

Later, when I’m getting my form signed, the Deputy Head tells me that I’ve done a good job and asks if I would be interested in

teaching drama full time, starting tomorrow. I could have said, 'phone my agent,' but in truth, I was too beat up for any quips. All I wanted now was to go home and crawl under the bed with my favourite pillow and a bottle of whisky with a rubber teat on the end of it.

After more harp music and wavy lines, I'm back at Marchington, and Maggie is gibbering about a café she bought which went up in flames and took her life savings with it. Another failed escape bid, another tunnel discovered by those pervasive prison guards. The cold is penetrating now. Sweat has turned to ice and my nose is streaming. I might have to slot someone for their fleece; it's them or me.

Some interesting and topical work has been left for the next class. An improvement on *Jane Eyre*, anyway. The content of the lesson is on printed A3 sheets and involves a magazine piece on a famous model who has achieved great things despite having her legs amputated below the knee. Cool, but not cool enough for the boys at the front who keep a-slippin' and a-slidin' off their chairs. After a suitable rebuke, I carry on reading the article hoping they will get into the spirit of the story. There are even juicy quotes from Frank Zappa, such as 'there is nothing sexier than tits and muscle,' but no go, falling off chairs is more appealing. I carry on though, determined to make sure the kids who want to learn get the opportunity, for that is my teaching ethos.

'Stop shouting for God's sake! You are giving me a bad head.'

I turn to a girl in hat, gloves and muffler.

'Excuse me?'

'Stop shouting,' she says. 'Or I'm off.'

'If I'm speaking loud,' I protest, 'it is to overcome certain people who are making my job very difficult.'

‘That’s it, I’m bored and I’m off.’

And at that she stands up, pushes by me, steps over the boys on the floor and walks out.

Brilliant.

‘Take no notice of her, sir,’ says a girl in the middle row, ‘she’s weird. Or them either,’ she continues, pointing with disdain at the heap of acne wriggling on the floor, ‘they are just morons. Let’s get on with the lesson, I’m enjoying this.’

The others mutter in agreement and I oblige because it pisses me off that a few can wreck the education of the many. It is the reason why in the big cities of America, state schools are called ‘poor man’s schools’ and why anyone with an average salary pays for their child to have an education in a school where disruption by a minority is not tolerated.

It will happen here, it’s on the way: it has to be.

One of the biggest problems with supply teaching is that I know nothing of individual personalities or circumstances or the reason young Jason keeps falling off his chair is because last week his father was electrocuted after spending two years on death row for a crime he didn’t commit. Another difficulty is that the regular teachers know the Darrens before they have gained five feet in height, eight stone in weight, several body piercings and an attitude. Consequently, their overall perception of the Darrens is a mixture of beast and little boys blue, which affords them a strong psychological advantage in dealing with their hormonal aberrations, whereas I only see the beast. By the end of the lesson, I am red faced and hot and all the classic symptoms are there - palpitations, clenching and unclenching of fists, high blood pressure, dry mouth and clamminess - so I go in search of their form teacher to take a big bite from her arse. When I find her, she is sitting at her desk with a pile of

unmarked exercise books, head in one hand and pen in the other and I think, does she really need a raging bull to cope with as well? Like she needs a colostomy bag. I let the matter rest.

Lunch time. I have to get out even if it's just to thaw. I get in my car and put the heater on but it only blows out more cold air. I drive, just drive, anywhere and find myself in the town centre in a traffic jam. By the time I have extricated myself and eaten an icy banana it's time for the afternoon lessons to start but at least I have managed to avoid the staff room, that limbo land of despair, and mad Maggie.

I used to whinge about teaching but not anymore. Grumbling is a coping mechanism that can keep you in the same undesirable position for a lifetime. My thinking now is - if you don't like it, don't do it. Or at least look for an alternative - but please don't sit around saying how crap everything is: leave, get out, make the great quantum leap of faith. I keep telling myself the same but most times I see myself as someone hanging onto a splitting branch while a river swirls about my legs and hips. I am unable to pull myself out but I can't let go either. Perhaps if I just let go I will find myself surging through wild white water but then, who knows, I may round a bend and find myself in a sweet meadow where cows are black and white and bees go hum.

The next lesson is with Year 11. My instructions are one word, 'Macbeth.' I sort out a few illustrated copies and while waiting for the class to arrive I try to keep warm by running on the spot. It's a small class but there is always a reason for that. Ten boys and one girl, Sarah, who chews gum like an extra in an amateur production of *Grease*.

I introduce myself; a tradition more than a necessity, and hand out the books.

'We'll read Act two, Scene two. Who'll be Lady Macbeth?'

I stare at Sarah and she takes the hint.

It's going well. Macbeth and his Lady have performed the dreadful deed and the gum chewer is doing fine. Macbeth is causing problems though, he is murdering the play as well as the king with his monotone rendition of the speeches.

'For God's sake,' I say. 'Give it passion.'

He pushes the text across his desk, folds his arms and pouts his lip.

'Anyone else want to read the part of Macbeth?' I ask.

No response, so it's left to me and Sarah to carry the scene.

'Your turn, Lady Macbeth.'

'Who was it that thus cried? Why worthy Thane,

You do unbend your noble strength, to think

So brainsickly of things... Fuck off!'

I'm sure the sullen former Thane of Cawdor was involved in her outburst but I was forced to send her out. That was the end of the reading because, even though most teachers are frustrated actors, I am not being paid enough to take on all the roles. By now, it's too dark to read the words anyway.

When they leave, I wait for the last class of the day but ten minutes later, no-one has arrived and it's becoming bleaker by the minute.

Usually, I see my role as a pilot whose job is to fly the plane, land it safely and go home. The big advantage of supply teaching is that you don't have to deal with meetings, parents, politics, staff rooms, senior management, government initiatives, ineffective trade unions and planning ad infinitum. Today though, I am strapping on my parachute and standing over a frozen wing as I am completely out of fuel.