What I Was

Meg Rosoff

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Extract

I am a century old, an impossible age, and my brain has no anchor in the present. Instead it drifts, nearly always to the same shore.

Today, as most days, it is 1962. The year I discovered love.

I am sixteen years old.

1

Rule number one: Trust no one.

By the time we reached St Oswald's, fog had completely smothered the coast. Even this far inland, the mist was impenetrable; our white headlights merely illuminated the fact that we couldn't see. Hunched over the wheel, Father edged the car forward a few feet at a time. We might have driven off England and into the sea if not for a boy waving a torch in bored zigzags by the school entrance.

Father came to a halt in front of the main hall, set the brake, pulled my bag out of the boot, and turned to me in what he probably imagined was a soldierly manner.

'Well,' he said, 'this is it.'

This is what? I stared at the gloomy Victorian building and imagined those same words used by fathers sending their sons off into hopeless battle, up treacherous mountains, across the Russian steppes. They seemed particularly inappropriate here. All I could see was a depressed institution of secondary education suitably shrouded in fog. But I said nothing, having learnt a thing or two in sixteen years of carefully judged mediocrity, including the value of silence.

It was my father's idea that I attend St Oswald's, whose long history and low standards fitted his requirements exactly. He must have rejoiced that such a school existed – one that would accept his miserable failure of a son and attempt to transform him (me) into a useful member of society, a lawyer, say, or someone who worked in the City.

'It's time you sorted yourself out,' he said. 'You're nearly a man.' But a less true description could scarcely have been uttered. I was barely managing to get by as a boy.

My father shook hands with our welcoming committee as if he, not I, were matriculating, and a few moments of chat with head and housemaster ensued. Wasn't the weather . . . hadn't standards . . . next thing we know . . . one can only . . .

I stood by, half-listening, knowing the script by heart.

When we returned to the car, my father cleared his throat, gazed off into the middle distance, and suggested I take this opportunity to make amends for my last two educational disasters. And then, with a pessimistic handshake and a brief clasp of my shoulder, he was off.

A bored prefect led me away from the main school towards a collection of rectangular brick buildings arranged around a bleak little courtyard. In the misty darkness, my future home uncannily resembled a prison. As we entered Mogg House (Gordon Clifton-Mogg, housemaster), the weight of the nineteenth century settled around my shoulders like a shroud. Tall brick walls and narrow arched windows seemed designed to admit as little light and air as possible. The architect's philosophy was obvious: starve

the human spirit, yes, but subtly, employing economies of dimension and scale. I could tell from here that the rooms would be dark all year round, freezing in winter, cramped and airless in summer. As I later discovered, St Oswald's specialized in architectural sadism – even the new science lab (pride of the establishment) featured brown glass and breeze-block walls dating from 1958, height of the ugly unfriendly architecture movement.

Up three flights of stairs and down a long featureless corridor we trudged. At the end, the older boy dumped my bag, pounded on the door and left without waiting for an answer. After a minute I was granted entry to a cramped dormitory room where three boys looked me over impassively, as if checking out a long shot in the paddock at Cheltenham.

There was a moment of silence.

'I'm Barrett,' said the blunt-featured one at last, producing a small black book from his pocket and pointing to the others in turn. 'Gibbon. And Reese.'

Reese giggled. Barrett made some notes in his little book, then turned to Gibbon. 'I give him two terms,' he said. 'You?'

Gibbon, tallest of the three, peered at me closely. For a moment I thought he might ask to see my teeth. He pulled two crisp pound notes out of an expensive calfskin wallet. 'Three terms,' he said.

I emptied all expression from my face, met and held his gecko eyes.

'Maybe four.'

'Choose,' said Barrett impatiently, pencil poised. He

squinted out from under a school cap pulled low over his face, like a bookmaker's visor.

'Three then.'

Barrett made a note in his book.

'I say four.' Reese dug into a pocket and pulled out a handful of coins, mainly pennies. He was the least impressive of the three, and seemed embarrassed by the ritual.

Barrett accepted the coins and looked up at me. 'You in?'

Was I *in* on a bet predicting the demise of my own academic career? Well, it certainly offered a variation on the usual welcome. I pushed past them, unpacked my bag into a metal trunk, made up my narrow bed with regulation starched sheets, burrowed down under the covers and went to sleep.

2

Rule number two: Keep something back.

I will tell you that I'm not one of those heroes who attracts admiration for his physical attributes. Picture a boy, small for his age, ears stuck at right angles to his head, hair the texture of straw and the colour of mouse. Mouth: tight. Eyes: wary, alert.

You might say that superficial flaws were not uncommon in boys my age, but in my experience this was untrue. Stretching left, right, up, down and diagonally in every St Oswald's class picture were boys of a more usual type – boys with strong jaws, straight noses and thick hair of definite colour; boys with long, straight limbs and bold, confident expressions; boys with skills, inborn talents, a genetically determined genius for politics or Latin or the law.

In such pictures, my face (blurry and unformed) always looked shifty and somewhat imbecilic, as if the flesh itself realized that the impression I was making was a bad one, even as the shutter clicked.

Did I mention that St Oswald's was my third school? The first two asked me (not entirely politely) to leave, due to the deplorable nature of my behaviour and grades. In

my defence, I'd like to point out that my behaviour was not deplorable if by deplorable you mean rude, belligerent, violent and antisocial – setting fire to the library, stabbing or raping a teacher. By deplorable they meant 'less than dedicated to study', 'less than competent at writing essays', 'less than interesting to the head and board of governors'. Given my gentle failings, their assessment strikes me now as unnecessarily cruel, and makes me wonder how they labelled the student who opened fire with an AK-47 in the middle of chapel.

In fact, my lack of distinction was mainly restricted to photographs and schoolwork. When it came to opinions, I was (I am) like the sword of Zorro: swift, incisive, deadly. My opinions on the role of secondary education, for instance, are absolute. In my opinion, this school and its contemporaries were nothing more than cheap merchants of social status, selling an inflated sense of self-worth to middle-class boys of no particular merit.

I will, however, grant them something. Without the first school, I would not have ended up at the second. Without the second, I would not have attended St Oswald's. Without St Oswald's, I would not have met Finn.

Without Finn, there would be no story.

3

It all began on the coast of East Anglia, past the indentation where the River Ore ran salt and melted into the sea. There, a bit of land stuck out from the mainland, a small peninsula roughly shaped like a rat's nose. In maps (old maps) this peninsula was labelled The Stele, after a seventh-century commemorative stone marker, or stele, found very near to school property in 1825.

The letter my school sent to prospective parents contained a three-quarter page description of the area. Location was a selling point (*salt air contributes to strong lungs and clear minds*) and elegant italics explained how the stele was found half-buried in earth, the stone large and heavy and probably transported from Lindisfarne on the Northumbrian coast. Such markers were not uncommon in this part of the country, but this one boasted an excellent carved portrait of St Oswald, a seventh-century king of Britain, with the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of 'Oswald Was Here' carved on it. The stone itself is long gone, moved to the British Museum.

St Oswald's School for Boys, which you won't have heard of, was situated two miles inland. The school road ran between the A-road and the coast in a more or less straight

line, with a footpath running parallel for most of its length. At the sea, the road turned left (north), while the footpath turned right (south). Following the footpath, you could reach The Stele in about twenty minutes – or at least you could reach the canal of deep water that separated it from the mainland. For only a few hours a day, when the tide was very low, the little peninsula could be accessed via a damp sand causeway. All around it, salt marsh and reed beds provided homes for nesting waders and waterfowl – oyster catchers, little terns, cormorants, gulls – and had once done the same for Roman, Saxon and Viking settlers.

A few miles and a million light years away was my home from home, Mogg House, a four-storey building with studies (tiny as tombs) on the bottom floor, communal dormitories in the middle, and bedrooms with living rooms on the floors above. Boys my age lived on the top floor in rooms designed for two, which now housed four, thanks to our bursar's desire to maximize revenues. Loos were located on the ground floor, and to this day I believe I retain exceptional bladder control thanks to the inconvenience of the conveniences. It was something we developed with time and practice, like proficiency in maths or arpeggio technique.

Despite the brutality of the coastal winters, we lived without heat. Warmth was considered antithetical to the development of the immune system and we were expected to possess an almost superhuman tolerance for cold. On a positive note, the conditions at my previous school – situated two hundred miles further north – had been worse. There, we kept warm in winter by sleeping in our clothes,

in woollen jerseys, socks and trousers with pyjamas layered on top, and awoke most mornings to banks of snow under the open windows and ice in the toilets.

At St Oswald's, we fell out of bed at the sound of a bell, buttoned a clean collar (if we had one) on to our shirts, pulled on yesterday's underwear, flannel trousers, socks and heavy black shoes, and headed downstairs for a breakfast of grey porridge and cold toast. Post-war rationing had finished eight years before, but the habit of mean, depressing food lingered in school kitchens throughout the land. After breakfast came chapel, then five lessons on the trot without a break, followed by lunch (pink sausages, green liver, brown stew, cabbage boiled to stinking transparency), followed by an afternoon dedicated to sport or the tedium of cadet parade, followed by supper, followed by prep, followed by bed.

Beneath this relatively straightforward schedule lurked the shady regions of school life where the real dramas were played out, where elaborate hierarchies established life's winners and losers, ranking each carefully according to the ill-defined caste system of school life. As in the outside world, social mobility barely existed; one's status at the start determined whether life would be filled with misery or triumph. I don't recall any boy improving his lot significantly in the course of his school years, though perhaps memory fails me.

'Oi, you!'

Three days in, I emerged from my own thoughts to meet the gaze of an imperious Upper Sixth.

'*You!*'

Yes, I sighed inwardly. *Me.*

'What's that?' He pointed to the bottom button of my school blazer.

It's a woodpecker, you creeping maggot.

He reached over with calm deliberation and tore the button off. It's worth noting that this required considerable effort. And left a large hole.

'*Un*buttoned,' he spat. 'Understood?'

I stared.

'The correct answer, scum, is *Yes, sir.*'

'Yes, sir.' I had learnt to imbue a lack of sarcasm with infinite subtlety.

He turned on his heel and stalked off, while I scrabbled in the grass for my button. I felt no particular shame, having encountered dozens of chippy little fascists in my time, but continued to wonder at their delusions.

Our world revolved around school rules, rules as mysterious and arcane as the murkier corners of a papal cabal. Bottom button of blazer open or not, left hand in pocket or not, diagonal or straight crossing of the courtyard, running or walking on the lawn, books in right hand or left, blue ink or black, cap tipped forward or back. There was no crib sheet, no list to consult, no house book embossed *Rules*. Regulations merely existed, bobbing to the surface of school life like turds. We took their randomness, their rigidity, their sheer number, for granted and we obeyed because they were there, because we were newer or younger or weaker than the enforcers, because to fill our heads with more meaningful information might require the use of our critical faculties. Which would lead

to doubts about the whole system. Which would lead to social and economic collapse and the end of life as we knew it.

It was easier just to get on with it.

Let me be clear: many boys (popular, clever, athletic) had a perfectly happy time at St Oswald's; I simply was not one of them. And yet I had certain attributes – a face that hid emotion, a healthy contempt for fair play – that served me well. I was not destined for glittering prizes, but I was not without qualities.

Our lessons took place beneath the draughty high ceilings of the main school building, always accompanied by the random clatter and crash of nineteenth-century plumbing. Day after day, I sat with an earnest but uncomprehending look on my face, knowing that it was exactly this expression that made teachers skip to the boy on my left. They hated explaining things over and over – it bored them, caused them to despise their lives.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the depressing familiarity of these conditions, I settled into St Oswald's at once.