The First Night

Something was wrong. The ceiling was too low. There were strange, unfamiliar smells; a muddled aroma of polish, disinfectant, stale bodies and cheesy feet. My mouth tasted of powdered cocoa. Another moment of disorientation was followed by a wave of panic. Where’s my Mum? What have they done with my brothers? Suddenly it all came back - the eviction, King Hill hostel, the late evening dash to the Home; my first time in a motor car, Mr Waller the council’s Social Worker and his Morris Minor, driving like he was Stirling Moss. Then the Superintendent's office, where we’d been made to strip and line up against the wall, the five of us, in order of size and age, while Dr Rose, the County Medical officer, carried out his statutory duty; prodding and poking, tapping a pencil on our heads, each in turn, like a musician playing a xylophone. “Nits, nits, nits and fleas”, was the verdict; then, when he examined Ian, “Impetigo.” I was discovered to have boils on my back and legs. “I’ll get them lanced first thing” promised Auntie Sybil. It was her way of claiming proprietorship, of separating me from my brothers; Edward and Ian (the youngest being placed with the eldest), going off to Lime Cottage with Auntie Harris, and Malcolm and Andrew, taken to Thorn to live with Auntie Fitzgerald and Uncle Bob.

Cottages that weren’t cottages (they were big, grim, former workhouse buildings), and an Auntie who wasn’t my Auntie, and who insisted she was my “house mother.” I was frightened and confused; I already had a mother, and I wanted her back. More awake than asleep now, I lay in the dissolving darkness, puzzling over the contradictions, praying that if I kept still I might remain unnoticed. But the world refused to go away; and slowly, but inevitably, a new day and a new reality began to intrude. Downstairs someone was moving about in the kitchen, preparing breakfast. Across the long whitewashed dorm, one or two bodies began to stir. Somewhere in the distance, in the Cottage next door perhaps, a radio played *She Loves You*. Meanwhile, out above the fields, a jury of seagulls squabbled over the very same song: were the Beatles a hit or a miss?

Another noise, at the door (the double doors were kept open at night in case of disturbance). It was Auntie Sybil, just as I remembered her from the night before; a big saggy-faced woman of about fifty, wearing a pink nylon housecoat and tartan carpet slippers. I closed my eyes but Auntie’s image, the heavy dark-rimmed glasses and unkempt, greasy hair, still loomed. I heard her too, slurping at her tea, and belching. And there was another noise - an odd clicking sound. It was Auntie indulging in her habit - disgusting even to my eight year old ears - of rolling her tongue round her mouth, lifting and dropping her lower dentures. Auntie, I’d already spotted, did this a lot when she was “on the warpath”. She also liked to jangle the set of keys she kept in her housecoat pocket. Both, she’d warned me, were signs that she was not to be crossed.

Auntie didn't hang about. A gulp of tea and she stepped in to the dorm, coming my way, heading for the disused fireplace at the far end. It was time for the first inspection of the day - a straightforward body count this, Auntie checking that we were all present and correct. I peered over the top of my bedding, watching her head turn mechanically from side to side, like an umpire at a tennis match. Were we all in our beds? Of course we were. Where else would we be.

Satisfied that all was well, Auntie leant against the mantelpiece and lit a Park Drive, casually flicking ash in to her empty tea cup and saucer. She coughed and wheezed, and began to whistle, drumming her fingers on her matchbox, playing with her keys, stringing things out a little. She was the boss. And we’d do well not to forget it.

Then, suddenly, the countdown started - 10-9-8-7…. Almost immediately the room burst in to life, the other boys clambering out of bed, donning dressing gowns, slipping in to slippers, following their morning routine, knowing that by the time ten became zero they must be ready, standing as stiff as guardsmen, sheets and counterpanes pulled back for examination.

But I didn’t move. “Don’t do it” warned a voice in my head. So I didn’t. Instead I stayed where I was, cocooned in my own little bubble, mind floating half way between waking and dreamland, body pleasantly paralysed. For a moment I was back in Doddington, in the bed I shared with Edward and Andrew, studying the column of marks that climbed the door frame - Dad's idea, a birthday ritual recording our heights as we grew. Other children had that room now. How did they measure up? I thought of the stone cracked window, the peeling wallpaper, the lazy light switch. Had it been fixed? What else had changed? What about my autographed Spitfire, black crayoned across the bedroom wall? Had some other boy's father spoken my name, even as he rubbed me out? That man’s children would be at our school now; in our teams, in the Romans or Vikings or Normans. I pictured them, our replacements, standing in the hall, listening to Mr Morris taking assembly, his first of the autumn term. I imagined the headmaster at his rostrum, welcoming the newcomers, explaining our disappearance. “Does any child here know what we mean by the word *eviction*?” Well, Mr Terry was something of a ne'er do well. He had rent arrears, and other debts, and so the family had to leave their home and the village. Where they've gone, nobody knows. But there's a lesson there, I think.... Now, who can give me a definition of “feckless?”

“Keith, *Keith*.” I returned from Doddington with a whoosh, shaken abruptly back to the here and now by the shrill sound of Auntie’s voice. “Keith, Keith!” There it was again. “Have you pissed yourself, Keith? You have, haven’t you? You *dirty* little bugger. Get out. Get *out*.” I sat up just in time to see the boy from the next bed hit the floor.

My first reveille (for that is what it was); I’d never been so close, nor so curiously, and helplessly, detached from such a scene. In fact I’d never witnessed anything like it. Little wonder I remember it in such detail. I can see Keith now, nearly half a century later, climbing to his feet, struggling to stand to attention, close enough to touch. And I can see Auntie, facing him, hands on hips, demanding to know *why.* “Well, Keith”, she said, “I’m waiting”. Then we all waited; a room full of boys I’d never met - and was too frightened even to acknowledge, while a shame-faced Keith stood quietly steaming in his stripy pyjamas. We waited in silence for Auntie’s angry words to die away. And then we waited some more, to see what would fill the void. Any sort of response was bound to be anticlimactic. And sure enough, on this occasion at least, there was no grand gesture, no violent outburst or act of defiance. Instead the moment passed and we were all, finally, put out of our misery by Keith’s bewildered attempt at an explanation. “I didn‘t mean to, Auntie”, he mumbled. “It just happened”.

But Auntie wasn’t going to let it go at that. Keith had gone to bed wearing his favourite Davy Crockett hat - a tatty synthetic thing in imitation racoon. Auntie snatched it up and hit him with it. *I didn‘t mean to, Auntie. I didn‘t mean to.* The words found their scornful echo, and were thrown back in Keith’s face. Then Auntie hit him again - across the head. “What do I think of your excuses, Keith? They’re pathetic Keith, just like you. You’re a great big moon-faced gormless lummox, that’s what you are. What are you?” Of course Keith had to apologise. “Say sorry to me” Auntie hissed, coming menacingly close once again. And Keith said sorry. “Say sorry to the other boys” More apologies. “Say sorry that breakfast will be late because I’m up here dealing with you.” And so it went on. Quietly, humbly, and repetitively, Keith said sorry. He said sorry to Auntie. He said sorry to the rest of the room. He apologised for being born. Then he was ordered to strip, clear his bed and wipe down his rubber under sheet, before being marched off to the downstairs bathroom. “Keith’s off to join the Red Hand Gang”, snapped Auntie as she swept past my bed. “And *you* can get up too, unless you want to join him”, she growled. “Well come on, I haven’t got all day. Let’s see you jump to it.”

I jumped.

Douglas Terry

Eastry Cottage Homes 1963-65