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We know
books

SPARE US!

A HARRODY

with Bruno Vincent

a

abacus
books

Chapter 1

It was a bitterly cold day, and a breeze as stiff as one of my father's smiles was gusting along between the tombstones.

I wished I had worn something warmer. I was waiting for my father and brother to appear in the royal cemetery for a crisis meeting, owing to my recent announcement that I would be moving to America.

Grey clouds scurried across the sky and I shivered in my thin shirt. As I stood there, I wondered whether the dead were still around us, looking on with an approving smile or a concerned frown? Just imagine them standing next to you. Henry VIII. Queen Victoria. Ken Dodd. Lenin.

Being in places like this always made me philosophical.

I cast my eye over the marble mausoleums, covered with ivy and moss. Just as I was thinking about crumbling, outdated relics, my father appeared. Willy was by his side.

Distracting us from what was really on our minds, Pa delivered one of his impromptu history lectures, pointing out architectural details and getting specific about the dead folk under our feet. But postponing the inevitable just made Willy and me even more tense.

When at last conversation turned to the matter at hand, I could tell at once they were both furious.

I tried to explain myself, but they wouldn't listen.

I kept starting to speak, but they talked over me.

I was desperate. I had nothing but love for my cowardly, selfish father and my balding, violent, self-righteous brother. I would never do anything to cast them in a bad light.

Yet it soon seemed that they didn't even understand why I was leaving.

Really?

I was aghast.

After everything that had happened, how could they feel an explanation was still needed? It amazed me.

All I had ever wanted was privacy.

In order to get it, it seemed that an exceptionally detailed 500,000-word book was in order . . .

Chapter 2

There was a lot about my childhood that was idyllic.

For instance, the exclusive Ladgrove school, tucked away in the English countryside, which I attended as a boy.

It was a luxurious private school with a deep history, surrounded by ancient woodlands, where boys dwelt among tottering castellated turrets and brick chimneys, viewing the outside world through rose-tinted windows set within the crumbling gothic masonry.

There were lavish platters of sweets and chocolates on tuck days. When it was a pupil's birthday he was served his own choice of dessert with heaps of cream and lashings of custard. (Although if any of the servants were impertinent, it would not only be the custard that was lashed – an extra treat.)

I have always remembered one particular sight.

It was in the dining hall. And before you ask, we did *not* all receive our post via personalised owls! In fact, our letters were delivered in the normal way, on silver plates by a footman.

(Although I remember that an owl once got into the main chamber while we were eating tiffin, and had to be shot with an iron crossbow bequeathed to the school for the very purpose in Geoffrey Chaucer's will.)

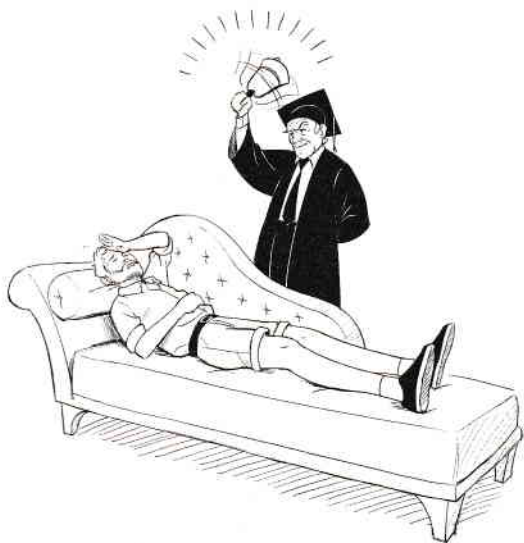
No, the particular memory that comes to mind was that

during luncheon when one of our masters, Sir Thomas Huge-Brownley, wanted our attention, he rang a little silver bell. How did he think this bell would be heard over two hundred hungry boys eating and yelling about the cost of Railtrack shares over their spotted dick?

But he didn't give up. He would stand there, ringing and ringing and not getting anyone's attention, becoming ever more red in the face as no one paid him the slightest heed.

I felt sorry for him. Ringing that bell, trying to stop the noise by making more and more noise. Utterly failing, and making a fool of himself into the bargain.

My therapist has asked me why this image haunts me so, and I can't quite put my finger on it.



Chapter 3

My history teacher embarrassed me one day by asking me a question about the British royal succession. None of the other kids in the class knew the answer either, but he singled me out.

‘Come on, Wales, you ought to know this! It’s your own family history after all!’

I thought this was too much. My family, after all, had labelled me the ‘spare’ – a shadow prince, a regal auxiliary, a fleshly insurance plan no more important than any other theoretical concept.

Now, that was fine by me. You wouldn’t see me complaining about that. Certainly not within the covers of a bestselling book and then also going on and on about it in interviews. No sir. That’s just not me.

I’m at peace with being the ‘spare’.

But to have to actually *read books* about this family who consider me superfluous? That felt like going too far, indeed.

I felt humiliated. I went up to him after class and requested that he not show me up in this way.

He bridled. He did not expect his students to speak back.

‘What’s this, Wales?’ he said, and his enormous bushy eyebrows shot up to his hairline like two hirsute badgers subjected to examination by a cold-fingered proctologist.

'I just think it's unfair to single me out like that sir,' I said. 'It reminds other boys of the difference between us!'

He was not impressed.

I skulked away, still cross, with vague thoughts that if (heaven forbid) I ever did end up on the throne, it would be a dark day for history teachers.

But the next time he came to class he gave me a small present to make amends. It was a wooden ruler with all the monarchs of England on it, so I could remember them.

There they were, from William the Conqueror (1066–1087) to Grannie (1953–). In the space beneath I could envisage 'Pa . . . – . . .' and 'Willy . . . – . . .' being engraved in due course.

I was amazed that he had gone to the effort of creating this unique, bespoke piece of woodwork just for me. I felt obliged to put it in my pencil case.

Truce had been declared. When it came to inflexible rulers, I felt I'd experienced enough already, but here was yet another one forced upon me.

Chapter 4

There was a mistress at school with whom I had a special relationship.

Whereas all the others were motherly and caring, she was sharp and strict. She often caught boys by the elbow and bashed their faces against the wall, just to teach them a lesson.

Whenever we were ill or got injuries on the sports field, she would stand over our beds, laughing, and poke sticks into our eyes.

She had a deformation of the spine and had to climb or descend the stairs very slowly and carefully. All the while, us boys would point and laugh at her, and pull insulting grimaces and dance around in imitation of her disability.

She had to put up with this constant abuse at our hands, and I was the worst culprit. But somehow, she knew that I meant it in jest, and even though she would inflict violent pain on me if she could manage to reach out and grab me by the collar, she mostly failed to do so.

In her heart I think she was laughing along, and really thought I was an absolutely top bloke.

How we loved her. The school really was a very warm and caring place.

Chapter 5

Most of the staff at Ladgrove school were sultry maidens, sash-aying along the corridors and waking us boys each morning by cooing softly from the doorways, leaving trays of hot buttered scones and bowls of steaming porridge in the centre of which slowly melted scoopfuls of clotted cream.



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They tended to our every need, ironing our jodhpurs, polishing our RayBans, then appearing before lights out to deliver our Horlicks surrounded in a halo of candlelight, just in time to read the closing figures from the day's FTSE share index.

They also washed our hair. We boys would lie supine in tubs while they lathered our scalps, singing songs and reciting poetry. Then they would dry us with our personally monogrammed Egyptian cotton towels.

It was a heavenly time being around these women, and naturally we all fell in love with them.

But it was perfectly natural and healthy. For boys with fraught relationships with their parents, you might have expected some serious psychological issues to have arisen.

Not for me.

I was unaffected and was as well-adjusted as any mother boy. I mean, other boy.