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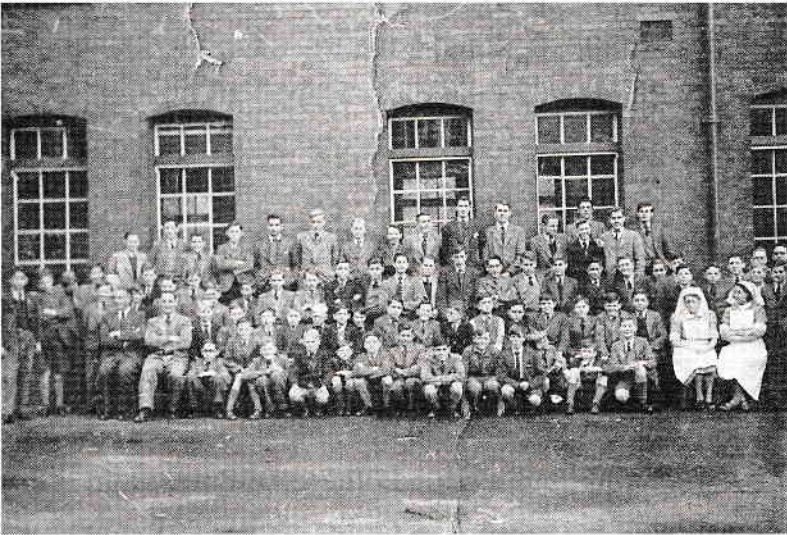


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ELEPHANT HEAD



It was on another damp, grey Sunday – this one in September 1949 – that I became, at the age of eleven, my own man. That was the afternoon my mother and father delivered me to a nineteenth-century redbrick boarding school on a hill above the town of Pontypool in Monmouthshire.

West Mon was a Gothic building with towering spires and, over the entryway, two bas-relief rams holding up a scroll that read *SERVE AND OBEY*. The building had a foreboding, haunted-

house quality not improved by the bone-chilling Monmouthshire rain, rumbling thunder and whipping wind. I hated it on sight.

I was left there because my mother was eager to give me a decent education. My father was so-so about the idea because it would take a lump of hard-earned cash to give me such an opportunity.

I was on my father's side, because I couldn't care less about school. Why waste the money? I had never been the sharpest knife in the cutlery drawer, and there seemed little hope for improvement. Already I had been written off by those utterly pallid-faced teachers in my primary school in Port Talbot – branded "Dennis the Dunce" by one particularly unpleasant teacher.

To the kids on our street, I was "Elephant Head". My head *was* large and looked somewhat inappropriate stuck on top of a puny body. My parents thought I was afflicted by water on the brain, but Dr Bray, a child specialist, assured them that I was normal.

"He just needs fattening up," the good doctor told them.

Being delivered by my parents to that West Mon school was not a catastrophic event. It just happened to be one of those inconvenient speed bumps on the highway of life, nothing more, but for some reason or other, that event planted in my brain a seed of indifference. I vowed, *I'll take my chances and never get close to my mother and father again – or anyone else, for that matter.* I no longer cared. I decided to live my life on my terms, to open my eyes to the future. Forget the past. *Childhood over. Copy that. Over and out.* The ghost had entered the machine.

After a brief meeting with the headmaster, Mr Harrison, and

his ebullient, zaftig wife, followed by a quick look around the claustrophobic dormitory of sixteen beds crammed into a square room with hospital-green walls, my parents and I returned to the parking space at the steps of the school's main entrance. My mother and father got into their car to drive home. As they pulled out, the sun glinted off the windscreen. Through the glare, I saw my mother wave to me. My father kept his eyes on the road, so I kept my arms at my sides and didn't wave back.

As their car – a well-polished Ford Model C Ten – disappeared down the driveway, I noted the number of their plate: BTX 698. For the rest of that wet autumn afternoon, I kept muttering the number over and over: “BTX 698. BTX 698. BTX 698.”

The school's motto was: “Believe, achieve, succeed, serve and obey.” The school song was even more depressing: “We march along with joyful song, with a song of victory.” We had to sing this ridiculous thing at every morning assembly before the grim teaching staff.

One of the housemasters in that brick prison was a cold-hearted military type; he had been involved in the North Africa campaign against General Rommel. I called him “Lob” because his face was lobster red. He told me that my merits and prospects were “nothing but rags and tatters”. I liked the funny, dramatic sound of *rags and tatters*.

“Hush, hush, hush,” I said. “I am what I am what I am. I am the Rags and Bones and Tatters Man.”

Also, I was good at playing the clown. I often goofed around as the scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*, Bela Lugosi as Dracula, or Boris Karloff as Frankenstein's monster. I was eerily good at copying any voices or sounds I heard. I could neigh like a horse

or bark like a dog. I also did Bugs Bunny: “What’s up, Doc?” Elmer Fudd. Daffy Duck. Porky Pig. “That’s all, folks!”

When I did my rags-and-tatters routine, some of the boys laughed, and Lob responded by writing on the blackboard: *“For what are men better than sheep or goats that nourish a blind life within the brain?” – Alfred Lord Tennyson.*

We were told to write it out twenty times. I treated the encounter with a sinister humour. As I copied out the words, I bleated like goats and sheep. Lob charged down the aisle toward me. Slaps. More bleating. More slaps.

The more slaps I got, the more I leaned into my survival trick, a gaze of pure, dumb insolence. This look displayed my passive indifference to everything hostile around me. Show no reaction. Stare them down. Pretend they don’t exist. I enjoyed this newly discovered power. Show no pain! Bury what pain there is, push it under the carpet, keep moving. It drove adults crazy, and that suited me fine.

Even though it was depressing having to live in that ghastly place, it was there that I experienced my first brush with William Shakespeare.

It was a Saturday night. We boys had been herded together in the school’s assembly hall, not to sing the school song – thank God – but to watch a film, a real film with sound. The school had hired a film projector and a projector operator, Mr Gordon Phillips. This was something new and exciting.

We sat there on our wooden seats and waited. Finally, Mr Harrison, the headmaster, swept into the hall, gown billowing out to indicate the significance of this momentous event. He was joined by his big, booming, battleship wife, old Ma Harrison. Our teachers followed. Max Horton, Lob

Garnett and others. Mr Harrison warned us to be quiet – no talking, no fidgeting, no laughing. Any boy breaking these rules would be removed – and then, so we imagined, swiftly executed in the gymnasium.

“Now, *Hamlet* is a very important film,” announced Mr Harrison. “Mr Laurence Olivier, the world’s greatest Shakespearean actor, has directed this film, and furthermore, he is passionately committed to broadcasting the powerful words and wisdom of the Bard of Warwickshire, Mr William Shakespeare.”

Oh, God help us all! Not Shakespeare. Please spare us this tedious triviality.

Mr Harrison rambled on for another five minutes about Shakespeare and Mr Olivier. Finally, he paid tribute to our projectionist, Mr Gordon Phillips from Griffithstown.

What a depressing hour this is going to be! I thought. We all turned to acknowledge Mr Phillips from Griffithstown. Mr Harrison told us to say: “Thank you, Mr Phillips from Griffithstown.” I felt I was in hell.

Mr Phillips from Griffithstown, standing between two film projectors, poised and ready for action, was a rotund, shiny-faced young man. His hair had been plastered down with Brylcreem, and he was wearing a blue bow tie for the event. This really was hell.

On the stage, a large cinema screen had been set up.

The lights in the hall were dimmed. On the screen was the familiar trademark introduction of the J. Arthur Rank Organisation: The giant gong being struck, the words *A J. Arthur Rank Enterprise*, the dark screen. And then, suddenly, the massive opening chords of William Walton’s music.

It was . . . *stunning*. The battlements scene. The ghost of

Hamlet's father. Inside the castle of Elsinore. Olivier. His opening soliloquy began:

*O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!*

I was transfixed to the very last line of the soliloquy.

But break, my heart; for I must hold my tongue.

I had never experienced an impact like that. It was explosive. I could not yet understand the structure of *Hamlet* and its nuance – its archaic words, new and unfamiliar language, the rhythm and phrasing.

But I felt that Olivier as Hamlet was speaking to me, referring to some long-vanished, ancient part of myself. It was an unearthly experience. The grief of Hamlet over his father's death and his mother's betrayal of her dead husband. I cried, overpowered by the epic depiction of damaged fathers and mothers and of how we're all haunted by the ghosts of memory. I was too young to grasp a modern sense of the words. But a force had broken into the centre of whatever I was.

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NINETY-THREE MILLION MILES AWAY

My abilities at that first boarding school amounted to zero, and so my poor parents had to rethink my education prospects. They were desperate and needed someone to help me pole-vault to the pinnacles of scholasticism, someone who could, they whispered, “put in a word or two, so to speak.”

It was like being part of a complex Shakespearean comedy, all winks and asides. I suppose I should have felt honoured, being the centre of such plots, but I felt like a dope, selling myself. I wanted no part of it.

Finally, we were guided to a mysterious figure, a person who had pull. Uncle Eddie – whom I was told lived in the Rest Bay area of Porthcawl and had “no side to him at all”, meaning he was a straight shooter – was to become my saviour.

It so happened that this great man everyone called Uncle Eddie was related to my father’s side of the family. They were “rotten with money”, my father said. These were the aged aunts and uncles living in St Mary’s Street, the Rest Bay *crachach*. *Crachach* was the pejorative term used to describe the Welsh elite who controlled the education sectors in Wales.

Neither of my two grandfathers had that same loftiness. Grandpa Hopkins – or Grandpa H, as I called him – was a tough old bird. And he loved to show me just how tough he was.

Every morning, he would take a cold bath, and then work all day.

“I’m as hard as nails,” he would say. He extended his right arm and clenched fist, then spread the fingers. “Look at that – not a tremor. That’s real strength. You’ve got to be tough in this world. It’s called survival of the fittest.”

He was born in Neath, South Wales, in 1878, and according to legend – his own legend, perhaps – he ran away from his drunken father and stowed away on a train to London. He found lodgings in Bermondsey, South East London. He had little money but managed to get a job cleaning and scraping floors in a German bakery near Piccadilly.

He soon learned that the bakery was a place of gloom and backbreaking labour, but eventually, he became a real craftsman, a baker and a master confectioner. Later, he won trophies at bakery exhibitions in Earl’s Court in London. I still have his silver cups, many of them inscribed. On one: **ARTHUR RICHARD HOPKINS 1924, FIRST PRIZE FOR CURRANT BUNS.**

Parts of his story were, perhaps, embellished, but I did get a feeling of authenticity, and I admired the old man. But he didn’t seem to have much regard for me except when I played the piano for him. “Anthony has a rather large head,” he said to my mother once. “What a pity there is nothing much in it.”

Anyway, that was Grandpa Hopkins. He told me a story once about a young man called Gerald with whom he’d worked in that London bakery. Gerald had married a young woman, and they were trying to feed their baby girl, but there wasn’t

enough food. Gerald was gravely ill. My grandfather thought it was consumption – tuberculosis – as a dry hacking cough was one of his symptoms. One morning, Gerald didn't show up for work, and the shop foreman announced to everyone that the young man had died of pneumonia the night before. The other men in the bakery said nothing. Work proceeded as normal.

My grandfather Hopkins became an industrial agitator. He told my father he had once met Vladimir Lenin. It could have been a tall story, a portion of his own legend. But it also could have been true, because Lenin had exiled himself to London. Leon Trotsky also lived in London, where at the time there was a fervid and passionate political stirring of Marxism.

Eventually, Grandpa Hopkins and my grandmother, Emmy, returned to Wales with their three young children, Miriam, Richard and Lorna, and they struggled to survive.

Wales has often been described as the “land of song”. Dylan Thomas created a mythological version in *Under Milk Wood*. But the truth is that there is nothing quaint or romantic or folksy about the Wales my family knew.

In 1921, when my father was fourteen, he was suddenly pulled out of school to work in the family bakery business without pay, and he stayed there until 1936.

On the other side of the proverbial garden wall was my maternal grandfather. His name was Frederick Thomas Yeats. He'd been born in Pewsey in Wiltshire. He would say to me, whenever I got upset: “It's all spilled milk, water under the bridge. Let it be.”

My grandfather found work on the railway lines and in the shunting yards of Swindon, then moved to South Wales, where the new steelworks foundry was being built. There he

met Sophia Phillips, an apprentice seamstress in a Carmarthen dress shop. They married and settled in Port Talbot. Two girls were born. The first was my mother, Muriel, born in 1913.

They lost the second, Jenny, my grandfather's favourite, to diphtheria when she was nine. My mother was twelve. One day at breakfast they heard a bump on the landing above. Her father got up and went into the hall, and there was Jenny slumped against the banister. He rushed up the stairs and lifted her in his arms. She was dead.

My mother told me that on the day of Jenny's funeral, as the coffin was being carried out to the hearse, she heard her father weeping and sobbing helplessly, hopelessly, in the little passage at the back of their house.

But the next day, he showed up as usual for his job as a crane driver at the steelworks. When he was asked if he wanted to take a few days off, he said no.

"I can't bring her back, can I?" he said. "Why relive all that? She's gone. Once you're dead, you're dead. The past is dead – nothing there." And he never spoke of his beloved daughter again.

Back to Uncle Eddie – Eddie James – who was worshipped by his family and spoken of in hallowed whispers: "He often goes up to London. You know, business and things. He often has breakfast on the train with our minister of health, Nye Bevan."

Uncle Eddie was also an editor on the *Western Mail* newspaper in Cardiff. He knew "high-ups" on the Welsh board of education. What good this would do for me, I had no idea.

One stiflingly warm Sunday afternoon, we were invited by Aunt Patty to meet Uncle Eddie for tea at her house on Es-

planade Avenue. As my father drove us out to Aunt Patty's, my mother, sitting in the passenger seat, turned to look at me. I was slouched in the back. She told me to sit up straight. "I hope you don't sit like that at Aunt Patty's! Sit up straight and behave yourself and stop fidgeting. And say please and thank you when Aunt Patty gives you a piece of cake. Don't slouch. And don't mumble when Uncle Eddie asks you a question."

I stared out of the car window as we drove along the seafront, and my mind drifted back to the last family visit. It was another death-knell Sunday afternoon. We were all gathered, the entire Hopkins brood. At least it seemed that way. My father's two sisters, Mimi and Lorna; Uncle Billy; Uncle Jack; and Bobby, my first cousin – all of us stuffed like sardines into the musty front room of Uncle Davey Charles and Aunt Nettie's house on St Mary's Street.

For the hundred and tenth time, my mother had told me to sit up straight and say please and thank you whenever Auntie Nettie chanced to offer me a stale Welsh cake on a daintily flowered porcelain plate.

Suddenly an exhilarating thought had struck me: *Why don't you just stand up now – yes, right now – and just go completely berserk and insane like those lunatics from Bedlam? Yes, why not? Go crazy right now and smash that silly flowered porcelain plate over your dear aunt Nettie's head.* Perhaps that was the first seed of vengeance planted in my backward brain. The seed of mayhem and danger.

As I sat in the car recalling that visit, I noticed my father looking at me in the rearview mirror. I saw his face and noted, not for the first time, how much he looked like the American singer Bing Crosby. I stared back at him. Dumb insolence. That drove him nuts.