An English Fiction

“You said you saw him in the distance. He was walking towards you.”

“Yes.”

“You’d heard about him. You knew he was a dangerous man to be seen with.”

“Yes.”

“You could have ducked down a side street. You could have turned around and walked back the way you came.”

“Yes, yes, yes. I’ve told you a dozen times.”

“And instead of avoiding him, you did what?”

“I want to see a lawyer.”

“You want a cigarette?”

“I don’t smoke.”

“You want a drink?”

“I don’t drink.”

“Some sort of Holy Yogi, are we?”

“I thought you meant alcohol. I drink tea.”

“Some sort of Missionary Muslim?”

“Why are my hands tied behind my back?”

“You know this man?”

A photograph, a mugshot, slapped down on the table. He shook his head.

“This man?”

In slow motion he moved his head left to right.

“Any of these men?”

Negative.

“You recognise none of these men, all close associates of your friend here…” A different kind of picture, a long shot, taken on a busy city street.

“He’s not my friend.”

“And yet you don’t deny knowing him? You don’t deny walking up to him in broad daylight, in the street? You don’t deny making contact?”

“I’ve told you.”

“Okay -- no drink, no smoke. No co-operation. You don’t like your hands tied behind your back? Our friend Jake here will oblige.”

Nazir was past screaming. He wanted to cry.

He closed his eyes, his hands stretched above his head, and leaned forward to ease the pain in his shoulders until the pain in his back became unbearable.

Friend Jake became blurred around the edges, shrank, started to look like Crump – Crump the self-styled Chief of the Choctaw, who had tied him up like this, dangling from a limb of an oak in the woods behind Hawksfeld, and thrashed the backs of his legs with nettles.

An English prep school. Preparatory school.

Nazir tilted back on his heels and then let his body slump forward in the hope that it would navigate itself through a brief moment of ease. His father’s chauffeur had showed the trick of it as he steered the Rolls down the long school driveway that first time; easing the chassis of the vehicle into each deep pothole and trusting its own rolling momentum to find the least painful way out the other side. He’d wanted to cry then too.

“Whatever you do, Nazir, you mustn’t let them see your tears.”

His father.

“You will have times of sadness, when you miss your mother. There will be times when you will feel loneliness, knowing that your father is a continent away.”

He could feel the distance. They sat apart on the broad seat in the rear of the car; no protective arm around his shoulder, no encouraging hand on his knee.

“A true Englishman may cry inside but he does not show his tears.”

As the tyres crunched on gravel laid like insulation across the front of the school building, he had mastered his tears.

Then as now.

“What are you smiling at?”

“Not smiles.”

Jake returning with a shopping bag. But no air of achievement, more of onus. Things to do.

Not a shopping bag either. A hood. Thick hessian with a drawstring.

“You can smile as much as you want now.”

Air restricted.

“With either set of cheeks.”

Trousers yanked down. Breath slowly. Even if there are nettles.

Not nettles, but collapse. On the floor in a heap. Sore in different places. Breath slowly.

“A sorry sight.”

Plenty of sorry sights at prep school. A high bar for ritual pain and humiliation.

“Tell me about your mother.”

The first voice again, not Jake. Or another voice. How many now, watching him? Try to sit up.

“Stay where you are. Your mother…”

A moment.

A kick.

“She died when I was eight.” Muffled.

“Name?”

“Ammi.”

Another kick.

“Mary.”

“Mary Mother of Jesus!”

“She was English, like me. Church of England. My father said…”

“We know about your father.”

No kick. A breathing space.

“And after she died?”

“Hawksfeld. Surrey.”

“And between terms?”

“Different places. Karachi, Bahrain, Brixton.”

“Who with?”

“Different Aunts, after my father disappeared.”

A harder kick. A painful haze clearing only to admit a desire to surrender.

“We know all about your father.”

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“An English gentleman submits to the authorities instituted above him. You must learn to be a good follower, son, whether in school, in your clubs and other organisations, in your church…”

Crump was Chief of the Choctaw. Crump was as much an authority instituted above him as the housemaster who made him a prefect.

And Crump knew all about the potency of removing trousers.

Long after your own pain -- which passed, after all, quicker than a cracked rib on the rugby pitch or a dislocated finger in the nets – there was the pain of those that followed, tied to the same tribal tree, naked, surrounded by Crump’s chosen braves. Watching a helpless one wet himself. It didn’t matter who wielded the nettles. The act of watching made them all authorities.

Perhaps he could make himself feel compassion for Jake.

He needed a strategy.

He needed a blanket.

He backed up to the wall and scooted sideways into the corner. His den.

Night had fallen; that’s why he was so cold.

These authorities were home by now, snuggling under a blanket with their wives, their girlfriends.

Perhaps not Jake.

Jake set to watch. Jake getting tired. He should feel compassion for Jake. He was getting tired himself, despite the cold. At least he could close his eyes, unlike Jake for whom he was feeling compassion.

Unless.

Unless Jake’s job was to watch for the hooded head to drop onto the chest, and instantly wake him up. Once… twice… every time the hood drooped. With another kick to the abdomen. Or with a bucket of cold water. Could he close his eyes with his head erect? Could he stay awake longer than Jake?

And if they brought on the music! How would he cope with Metallica on an endless loop, full blast? The Sex Pistols? Stockhausen?

How would Jake cope, even on the far side of a closed door?

He needed a strategy.

He summoned his father.

“Above all, an Englishman never snitches.”

Snitch on who? Jake? Crump? Ammi?

“A gentleman must show that he has backbone. He will have principles and values that he will not abandon at any cost.”

At any cost.

“Never borrow money or expect special favours. Both are bad form.”

Not even a drink. And don’t cry. Don’t snitch. Submit to the authorities instituted above you. He had lived up to all.

But these were rules, hardly principles. What were the values?

He could save himself from the cold water and waves of Metallica if only he could pin down these English values. Something he and Jake could agree on.

Not pomp and circumstance, or fish and chips.

He and Jake? Not the rule of law, then, or human rights, or democracy and freedom of speech. Not health care according to need, free at the point of delivery.

He went back to Hawksfeld and took Jake with him.

What could they discover? What could they say about these privileged boys and the values they were being moulded to?

An Englishman is someone who…

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English values are…

English values…

Jake?

An Englishman is someone who lives by English values.

“You said you saw him in the distance. He was walking towards you.”

“Yes.”

“You’d heard about him. You knew he was a dangerous man to be seen with.”

“Yes.”

“You could have ducked down a side street. You could have turned around and walked back the way you came.”

“Yes, yes, yes. I’ve told you a dozen times.”

“And instead of avoiding him, you did what?”

“I shook his hand.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said nothing.”

“What did you say?”

“I said nothing. I shook his hand.”

A flat hand slamming down on the table. “Why?”

And again. “Why? Why? Why?”

A different, calmer voice: “And before you answer, think of the consequences of withholding information. Further consequences.”

“Why did you shake the hand of this dangerous man, this man wanted for questioning, this man under suspicion of committing the most terrible acts of violence?”

“He stopped in front of me. I could tell he recognised me. He had visited my father’s house many years ago, when I was a child.”

“And so? What happened?”

“And so I shook his hand. Like any gentleman would. He had been a guest in my father’s house.”

When his hands were finally untied he didn’t know what to do with them. Until someone came in with his trousers and told him to put them on. Then his shoes. Then his jacket. And then the hood again.

Suddenly, a sharp jab in his thigh, through the cloth of his trousers. Nothing to fear from a truth drug. Plenty to worry about if he woke up in a shed in Diego Garcia.

He woke slowly, with a splitting headache, slouched in the corner of a stone courtyard. Not a black site then; more of a grey one. Grey and cold and damp. He could smell something rotten, organic. Decaying leaves perhaps, and urine. He looked down. Not his own at least. And cigarette smoke. A pub, maybe. He was round the back of a pub. Yes, he could hear voices, talking in English. He couldn’t pick out the accent.

“You all right, mate?”

Still couldn’t place it. Somewhere up north, maybe. Not Liverpool. Not Tyneside. He struggled to his feet. His ‘mate’ disappeared round the corner. He tried to straighten out his clothes, patted down his hair, then patted his pockets. No credit cards – for what they were worth -- no phone, not even a handkerchief. Nothing in his stomach either. Just dirt inside. Dirtiness and disgust.

He staggered round the corner and found himself in a covered alleyway, his ears assaulted by city noise trumpeted across the far end. With a hand against the wall he edged towards the road. Night was falling but he emerged from the alleyway as if stepping out from a mineshaft into a bright, fresh world. He stepped into a wide shop doorway while his senses adjusted.

Fifty yards down the road there was a bus stop with a narrow shelf he could perch on and look purposeful. He must watch for the elderly, disabled, pregnant women; offer them his perch. It gave him permission to look and what he saw brought a peculiar reassurance.

Ordinary people going home at the end of an ordinary day.

He stuck his hands in his pockets to warm them, and discovered a ten pound note. It was crisp and newly minted, folded in half neatly. Jake had a soft centre after all. Or perhaps this was routine, prescribed in a secret departmental protocol: enough to get a bite to eat and then make a call home, or to his boss, or to his bank. Confident of the immunity they had created through his degradation.

He could call the police, a lawyer, a journalist. He would have bruises to show, and chafed wrists. But how would they stand against all the other pitiable little sores anyone looking into his life would discover?

Degradation and disgust.

He began walking.

Where the road opened into a square, half a dozen stalls were being dismantled. A man packed flowers into boxes and loaded them into a van.

“How much are the daffodils?” Nazir nodded at a bucket.

“This time of day mate, a quid a bunch. Three for two quid.”

“How many are left?”

The man rifled through the bucket and said there were about thirty.

“I’ll take them all for a tenner. You can go home for your dinner.”

The man screwed up his face in mock agony.

“And throw in ten sheets of wrapping paper.”

The man laughed then. “A girl friend in every pub, ‘ave yer?”

Nazir shook his head. “Three for two pounds. I’m going to walk these streets until I’ve doubled my money.” He held out his crisp new ten pound note. “A time-honoured English way.”

“You’re on, mate.” The van man took the note and counted out ten sheets of paper.

Nazir lifted half the flowers in the crook of his arm and swung them from side to side to shake off the water.

“Where’d you live, mate?”

Nazir looked up and down the street. “Here.”

“You here tomorrer?”

“I’ll be here.”

“I’ll tell you what, then: you take ‘em in the tub. The daffs’ll look better, and you’ll keep dry. But I’ll need the tub back tomorrer. I don’t suppose you’ve got another tenner for a deposit?”

“You suppose correctly.”

The man held out his hand.

“Then we’ll shake on it. You know what that means, I suppose? A gen’leman’s ‘andshake?”

Nazir took the man’s hand in silence and shook it firmly.