

CORREIH SOJOURN

CHAPTER ONE

LOSING TWO TEACHERS LOOKS LIKE CARELESSNESS

‘No, it won’t make any difference,’ said Hammy looking a little too earnestly at Gary. Having known each other for almost all their 18 years of life Gary was used to Hammy’s impetuosity and directness.

‘Yes, it will,’ replied Gary, not usually so robust in argument. ‘If you use British or even Scottish accents it’ll seem fake and as if we weren’t even trying to speak American. Buggy Malone is about Chicago gangsters. It has to be done with their accent to seem authentic.’

‘That’s the whole point in using our accents. It’s challenging American stereotypes. Some Parliamoglasgow would sound great, hilarious even,’ went on Hammy, sure he was right. ‘We live just down the road from the richest Glasgow patter.’ Actually about 15 miles away.

Gary wavered a little, but only momentarily. ‘If you use Parliamo Glasgow Stanley Baxter’ll turn in his grave.’

‘Ha, ha. He’s not even dead.’

‘Then this’ll kill him off. Talk sense Hammy. You’re always challenging something or another. It’s either debunking Lord of the Flies or denigrating the Impressionists. For once just do something for real. The audience is expecting American accents. Pure and simple. Miss Dakers said we could have a free hand but this idea...’

‘Alright. Let’s think it over.’ Hammy had calmed down as he usually did when he had run out of bluster. They shook hands, murmuring something about a truce and sat down on a bench outside their school and all heat had gone from their exchange. ‘I think it’s pretty good of her to give us the chance to direct the school play this year.’

‘Jointly direct,’ said Gary pointedly. Hammy grimaced. ‘After last year’s success as assistant floor whateverers and light and sound guys we’re highly favoured indeed,’ he went on, irony intended.

‘Yeah. But it was either us or that smarty pants twosome Laura and Martin. OK, they’re good actors, as we saw in The Little Foxes but... naw, Dakers was wise to keep them on the actual stage and not in directing.’ There was a pause as a pal or two passed by, greeted them and then went on. The leaves of the trees around the high school grounds fell as they sat and Hammy played with an especially fine beech leaf. ‘I don’t suppose anyone will think it’s nepotistic of me to be chosen considering I am the nephew of Snedders the head of the English department.’ More said into the air than to Gary.

‘A fact he strives hard to conceal from what I’ve heard,’ piped up Gary, smirking.

‘Well, he’s very democratic and has professional integrity and all that, doesn’t he?’ Hammy retorted.

‘Of course. Your lack of academic excellence and non-existent prowess in track and field might also play a role,’ laughed Gary as they stood up. The school bell was heard and after a sigh they trod slowly through the gates and back to the grind. It was still early in the term so no great pressure on anyone.

As they ambled along Gary and Hammy saw Mr Sneddon, the Snedders spoken of a moment ago, walking out of the building with an unknown man who was carrying a briefcase. He didn't acknowledge them and they detected something alien in his manner. Mr Sneddon usually had a mock wry smile for them, a word or two of pun practice or something like that. Not today. He was looking like he had swallowed a hard boiled sweet and it was bothering his digestion. He passed and after getting to the main door of the school Gary couldn't resist turning around and he saw the unknown man take Mr Sneddon by the elbow and guide him to the left and out of the school gate. Hammy and one or two others had noticed it too.

Derwin, a sporty lad who always tried too hard to be friendly with Gary and Hammy, had also noticed this. As they went along the corridor he said to them, 'I wonder who he was, the man with Snedders. That's what we call him, right? I have the feeling I know the guy but can't quite...' Then he went off to his class, mathematics. Gary and Hammy went on to theirs, chemistry with Mr Blair.

They had more or less forgotten the incident when the chemistry teacher announced that he had a free period after the class and they were to remain here. Their next class was cancelled. Gary looked at Hammy and mouthed, 'Snedders.' Yes, it was to have been their class with him. Literature. Out of Africa, part three. Hammy frowned. Gary tapped a pen on his cheek. The class started but the boys were a little distracted. It finally came to an end as the Bunsen burners were put away. Notes were written up by everyone and Mr Blair said to stay in class while he went out for a moment.

Through the glass panel on the door there was a tap, an insistent one. It was Derwin. Then the door opened and he beckoned to Gary to come over. Gary scowled and told him to come to him instead. Looking around in case Mr Blair returned, Derwin came forward, his wiry frame all excited and he spoke to Gary saying that the man they'd seen with Snedders was from the 'polis' as the police are affectionately called in that part of Scotland. 'Plain clothes, a detective. My da' knows him. Tough cookie but on the level.' He looked at them wide eyed, pleased with himself and seemed to be looking for some response.

Gary paused then said, 'Thanks for the gen.' He looked at Hammy.

'Are you not missing your next class?' Hammy said testily to Derwin, not wanting to encourage him.

'It's cancelled as well. Miss Manson isn't here so we're doublin' up with a small French class. Mostly girls so it's quite nice. But we've to just sit and...' Then he saw Blair had returned and he scarpered.

After Mr Blair repeated for them to just sit and remain silent, which was easy to do as fifth yearers, he reminded them, Gary moved closer to Hammy. 'Police? I wonder what it'll be about,' he said sotto voce.

'And another teacher missing. Cancelled class.' Hammy was looking intrigued. 'Do you know what I'm thinking?'

'No.'

'Neither do I,' Hammy said just as Mr Blair raised his eyebrows in a mild gesture of reprimand.

'I understand our two budding theatre directors need to consult on matters thespian, I said 'thespian' you sniggerers in the corner, not anything else. But pray do so quietly. I am looking forward to seeing Bugsy Malone done differently. How differently we shall see.'

Hammy chirped up, 'How about with Glasgow accents?' And a wave of mumbling went round the room of about 20 teenagers. Hard to say whether it was positive or negative.

‘How about doing it in the scud? You could call it ‘Scudsy Malone,’ said one joker and that got a reaction.

But Gary and Hammy were still a little preoccupied. Mr Sneddon. And the detective. Plain clothed. Discreet. But why was that necessary? He’d been their English teacher for several years. He’d been a sort of mentor, more for Gary, and had helped him with his creative writing. He had told him about a journalism competition that summer. More up Gary’s street than fiction. He hadn’t won but the practice had been invaluable. Whenever he’d taken ethics and debating classes he often presented the students with three or four scenarios and got them to decide on one of them. He sometimes made it so obvious what the ‘wrong’ course of action would be by giving them two ridiculous suggestions and then it became clear. Gary had often spotted that and the students loved this approach. Gentle ethical persuasion or something like that.

Gary was thinking this over and about what was happening to Snedders. Was all as it seemed? Could Derwin be believed? Hammy gave him a wry look and had similar thoughts. He was Hammy’s uncle after all. But Hammy couldn’t claim familiarity with him as he had never been so involved in the academic stuff as Gary was.

Just then Kerry, a girl from another class, knocked on the door. Bold as brass she walked forward and approached Mr Blair. He looked up from his Guardian and smiled. ‘Yes, Kerry?’ The class in general looked at her coldly. She was not popular and a bit of a teacher’s pet type. Top in all her subjects.

‘I got a message for Gary Stewart,’ she said confidently as she held up a folded note, and she turned around and gave it to him before Mr Blair could inquire further.

‘Who is it from Kerry? This is most irregular,’ he said but didn’t sound too annoyed. She was well thought of by the teachers. It must have been genuine he thought.

‘Sorry sir, I’m late for biology,’ she said and she walked, not ran out, such was her bravado. Mr Blair said nothing more and looked over to Gary who was digesting the note. It was from Derwin and said, ‘Tell Blair something embarrassing has happened and you can’t talk about it in front of the class but could you be excused for a minute. Come to the bottom of the stairs and I’ll see you there. It’s about Mr Sneddon.’ Gary folded up the note, trying not to be shocked at his spelling, and shoved it in his trouser pocket as he saw Mr Blair coming towards him.

‘Gary, what’s going on? It’s a free period but...’ he said dryly.

‘Sorry sir,’ and in a semi-whisper, ‘it’s a bit embarrassing. I don’t think I can talk about it in front of my mates. Please, I beseech you...’ in a mock dramatic tone. The class sniggered.

Some wag mumbled, ‘It is the old piles again? Run out of cream?’

Hammy puckered up in mirth and nodded knowingly. But he was puzzled too. Gary then asked to leave for a minute, super politely.

Mr Blair, ruminating, after a few seconds nodded his head. ‘Never let it be said I am an unreasonable man. Two minutes only. And no, James Hamilton, you can’t go with him. Tweedledee will just have to...’

‘Put the hemorrhoid cream on by himself,’ said Specky Leckie and Mr Blair turned on him with a fierce look.

‘No toilet humour if you please,’ he spat out. But all the same he admired the quick wit.

‘Thank you sir,’ said Gary knowing he would be pushing it if he asked for Hammy to leave the room too with him. He mouthed to him something about coming back quickly and as he left his emotions were all in a flux. What was Derwin up to?

He walked along to the stairs and saw Kerry and Derwin there and they pulled him by the arm into a recess in the corridor. Gary was unsure of all this. No friends of his but why were they so keen to talk?

‘Listen,’ said Derwin intensely, ‘there’s something goin’ on with Snedders and Miss Manson. She left in tears an hour ago and hasn’t been seen since.’

Kerry then added that any questions to the staff were rebuffed sharply. ‘And now Derwin tells me the man who accompanied Mr Sneddon out of the school is from the police. What do you know about it?’ she asked, almost accusingly.

Playing for time Gary said, ‘As much as you do. What’s it all about? Why was it Kerry who came into the class with your message?’ Gary looked directly at him, not afraid to offend this boy outside his circle.

‘Do you think Blair would have taken me seriously? I’m nothin’ to him. Kerry’s in with the bricks. School magazine and all that,’ and she rolled her eyes, ‘with the staff. He almost didn’t challenge her. My brainwave,’ he finished proudly.

‘But why are you asking me? Who am I to Snedders?’ Gary didn’t like these proceedings one little bit.

‘Well, you’re best mates with his nephew, Hammy. And... you’re heavily involved in the debating class, writing, the journalism stuff last term. All that.’ Derwin went on, ‘You’re almost a friend. Kind of.’

And as he said it he knew it was all true. There was a bond of sorts. At least as much as possible between teacher and pupil. Gary then took the initiative. ‘What do you two know then?’

Kerry thought this over and said about as much as they had just said. But then added, ‘Miss Manson started acting a bit odd last week, seemed under pressure and lost it a bit once or twice. That’s all I can say.’

Gary digested that. Then he said he would subtly ask Mr Blair about it. In a roundabout way. Then judge by the reaction. He looked at them.

Derwin said that was clever and that any staff they had asked about it in the last hour or two had practically barked back at them. ‘Even to you Kerry...’ he said. It was the wrong thing to say.

‘What do you mean, even to me? Am I some sort of teacher’s protégé? Some kind of moll?’ Derwin looked puzzled at that word but Gary knew what she was trying to say.

He said he had better get back and just as he said the words Mr Blair appeared. Kerry and Derwin scarpered and Gary walked sharpish back to his class. Blair said to him, ‘Tweedledum is pining for you. Dying to know all the gen. Oh, the acrid intensity of youth...’

Gary secretly texted to Hammy the bare details and Hammy’s poker face served him well. Gary thought he’d leave it a few minutes to mention Snedders to Blair. Even obliquely.

‘I think I’ll open some windows to get fresh air,’ Blair said as he walked around the room. It was a boy’s only class so he felt a bit more free to say, ‘Don’t you boys believe in showering each day? This place smells like a French brothel.’ The mention of this word met a stark reaction. Outside of Orwell and other literary discussions this sort of word was not at all usual. Boys looked straight ahead, unsure how to react.

Specky Leckie was the only brave lad there. He put his hand up most politely and Mr Blair said, ‘Yes?’

‘Excuse me sir, but how come you know what a French brothel smells like?’ At this the whole class roared with laughter and raucous banter and paper pellets were thrown with abandon. Mr Blair put his hand up in a sign of a truce and they all calmed down, the boys looking very pleased with themselves at the smart comment of Leckie.

Gary was glad and texted Hammy to say he would now bring up Snedders and see how Blair reacted. Hammy texted back, ‘Good luck.’

Gary, his mouth drying up, found the courage to put up his hand and asked, ‘Is there going to be a supply teacher to replace Mr Snedders while he is... indisposed?’

Blair, showing little emotion, commented on Gary’s use of the quaint ‘indisposed’ and that was all. Silence. Some of the boys knew nothing about the two teachers’ sudden absence but others did. Gary hoped one of them might be more forthright. But Hammy mouthed to Gary how the reaction had been weird and inexplicable. Gary agreed, his frown pretty telling.

But another question was not long in coming. Not from Specky Leckie but from another lad, a newcomer to the school. He didn’t put up his hand but said, ‘Sir, why did Mr Sneddon walk out of the school with another guy, bold as brass. Is he bunking off?’ It was either naivety or stupidity, Hammy thought but it was alright. At least he hadn’t been the one who said it. Nevertheless, it had the desired effect.

‘Can’t a teacher be ill from time to time? The man is not an ox,’ said Blair, but his voice quivered.

Hammy almost couldn’t believe himself but he came out with, ‘Even oxes get sick, sir, surely.’

‘Oxen, James. Oxen, an irregular plural.’ Blair then hid behind the Guardian. ‘Yes,’ thought Gary and Hammy and who knows how many of the other boys, ‘something very odd going on.’

Hammy then sallied forth with a comment which he almost threw into the air as if he was just thinking out loud. ‘I was reading an article the other day that said you could always tell a good FSB Russian secret service operative from a stupid one by how they answered the question about what did for a living. A clever, skillful one would have an answer, a glib one. ‘Oh Komrad, I work for Russian railways, checking the goods wagons.’ A really quite respectable Russian accent. ‘The stupid one gets taken off guard and fumbles and mumbles something about a nebulous job. But no one is fooled. So the idea is to get your answer off pat, sir... just a thought, that’s all.’

Those clever enough to realize how Blair had fudged the issue were pretty impressed, most of all Gary, and he was immensely proud of his friend. Did Blair’s nostrils dilate in suppressed fury? Fury that he been caught out? Or fury that had had to handle what seemed to onlookers a difficult, delicate situation? Too early to tell, mused Gary but it was mighty interesting to observe. If looks could kill Blair would go down for several life sentences.

Gary then texted to Hammy as Blair was still half hidden by his newspaper. ‘I am ashamed you showed your ignorance. ‘Oxes’? Huh. Haven’t I learned you better than that?’

The reply was swift. ‘Of course I knew the plural. I’m not as daft as you look. It baited him and, if you’d taken the time to notice, it worked. Unnerved him... I am self-learned after all.’

Gary looked over to Hammy and mouthed, ‘Sorry’, and his friend put up his right thumb. No malice between them. Then Gary felt a vibration and read a message from a boy in the class asking what was going on with Snedders. Then he got another. Hammy too got a message with the same question. They

both lifted their eyebrows and looked over to the text senders and shrugged. 'Know as much as you do. Let's meet up at break,' Gary texted. Two lads nodded agreement.

Just then Speckie Leckie stood by the window and called out, 'Oh, he's back. He's just returned looking like... I've no idea...' At that Blair almost jumped up from his desk, discarded the Guardian and went to the window. A few of the boys did too until Blair waved them back and told them to sit still. But it was clear he was upset. One boy leaned over and whispered to Hammy that it was Snedders and he was walking back into the main entrance, alone. Hard to say what he looked like, it was too far away. But Blair's reaction was clear to see. It was almost painful to observe. Gary motioned to Hammy and they both were perplexed as Blair's face showed something far from the annoyance of a few minutes ago. What was it? Distress, concern, relief? Impossible to say but from Hammy's vantage point it was clearly seen he was upset. Hammy texted to Gary, 'Think we should cool it for a bit. Leave well alone.' Gary, squinting, read it and mouthed and gestured to some other boys to calm things down. They were uncertain how to react but after a few seconds they got the point, mostly.

Blair went back to his desk and returned to some degree of composure. He folded the newspaper and asked Gary how the casting was going for Buggy. Was there a strain in his voice? Gary waited a second or two and, on finding his voice, he said it was going alright but they needed more boys for the bigger scenes. 'No acting experience required. Just be gruff and act as you do in the playground and you'll do fine...' he said and there was a muted wave of laughter. But Blair sat unmoved. Hammy managed a false smirk.

Blair looked at his watch and sighed. There was a tenseness in the room and the last few minutes of the period dragged on. There was a piano playing in the distance. It was 'Where are the clowns?' thought Gary. No connection to this. Or was there? A gym teacher's whistle blew quite nearby in the field at the back. Usual sounds of a secondary school. Blair got up and walked around the room, straitening desks, chairs, picked up bits of paper. Keeping himself occupied with trivia as one does when distressed. Was he so distressed? Gary was almost sorry for him. Actually, yes he was and looking at Hammy and his glancing over to Blair he could sense he too felt for Blair. The man was going through something. An unknown something, true, but the two of them had enough compassion to know it was time to shut up. Leave him to it. And then retire from the scene when the bell rang for lunch.

A little more of the piano, then kids running back to the school. Another desk was moved a little into line. Blair cleared his throat and asked the boys to get ready to go. Somehow most of them read a subtle undertone into his voice and politely packed up and then the bell finally went. Blair looked relieved and the boys went out sharply. Gary and Hammy, as if by telepathy, didn't hang back and together they went out and along the corridor, out the building and to a corner where some of their year hung out. Under the big tree.

They gathered there with Mal, Dade and somehow Derwin appeared in their midst, causing a tut or two. Gary sort of took the floor and he told what little he knew and there were nods all around. No one really knew any more. The reaction of Blair was chewed over. Derwin was keen to interject and chose a moment when there was a lull.

'I heard that Blair and Miss Manson were at teacher training college together. So maybe that's why he's so upset. Pals for years,' he said, raising his eyebrows and anticipating a response from the tight knot around him.

Hammy didn't think it was a bad piece of information but it didn't seem to be so relevant. It was Snedders and why he had been with the police that no one could shed light on. The sticking point. He ventured, 'Time will tell. The next day or two. Maybe we'll find out a bit more. As we all do I like Snedders, alright he's my uncle, but I'm not going to use that to get any gen on this. So don't ask me to.

Agreed?’ and he looked around at the four other lads who were looking serious and they all denoted agreement.

‘Kerry said she was going to try to find out something about Miss Manson and how the two things are related,’ Derwin said. Nobody responded. Then Gary noticed something and stared over to the main entrance. The boys followed his puzzled gaze. It was Snedders, carrying a cardboard box, things spilling out of the top. Files, papers, trivia. Gary and Hammy looked at each other. What was the other one thinking? Should we approach him? A horrible sight. He was carrying out his work, his educational credentials of several years. Should they approach him? Would he rebuff them? Hammy was his nephew. Did that make a difference?

Snedders was also carrying three carrier bags and one was in danger of bursting. Hammy whispered to Gary, ‘Looks like the purple bag will spill open. Should I...?’ But at that moment it fell to the ground. Snedders looked down, then strangely he looked over to the boys under the tree. Then he bent down, stiffly, to gather up the purple bag. It was too much for Hammy to bear. He strode forward and rescued it from a small puddle and tied up the ripped handles. Snedders took it in his overburdened hand, looked wryly at Hammy, stole a glance over to Gary. Blank, but it was deliberate. ‘Very odd behavior,’ thought Gary and he felt a momentary stitch in his stomach.

Snedders walked off, through the gate, and he looked back at the building. Blank face or... was there something? Hard to say as it had been so brief. Hammy looked to Gary and looked as if in pain. Then Snedders was gone, over to his car, opened the door and quickly drove off.

Derwin was the first to speak. ‘Did you see that? Did you see it? He’s been brutally sacked. Just like that. All his stuff and turfed out. It must have been pretty serious whatever...’

Hammy growled, ‘You don’t know nothin’. You don’t even know the guy.’ Gary was glad he’d put him in his place. But it was puzzling all the same.

‘And what was with the looks he gave us? Like he was... like Snedders was...’

‘Quit it, Derry. Stop it before I make you regret it.’ Hammy was worked up. Snedders was their teacher, his and Gary’s. Even Derwin using the nickname annoyed him to the core.

‘Have it your own way then,’ said Derwin as he started to walk off.

‘To lose one teacher might be regarded as misfortune but losing two looks like carelessness,’ said Gary miserably. ‘Wilde.’

Hammy answered, ‘Too true, really wild.’ But he knew the quote.