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| Card School  By  Andrew Milner |

# Chapter One

The Saint Sebastian Primrose Academy for Young Men sits proudly on the moors making an impact on anyone who sees it; although only a handful of local walkers would go near it because the closest main road runs two miles away. Access is gained to the school from a private road making its way through the woodland, climbing higher and higher until the sight of the school jumps straight out in front of you from behind the trees. Black stone shows the many years that it has taken a beating from every possible weather condition imaginable; the cleaner stone showing where the school has been extended and modernised.

Sir Sebastian Primrose had the house built for himself towards the end of the 1700s and lived there until his death from a fever in 1815. On his death he left instructions, against the wishes of his family, that his house would be passed on to the nuns in the Daughters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ order, who in turn used it as a convent school and a place for novice nuns to retreat to contemplate a life devoted to God before taking their vows. With fewer nuns joining the order, and the long expected death of the Mother Superior, the convent school closed in 1969 and was sold. A year later it re-opened as a private school taking the name ‘Saint Sebastian Primrose Academy for Young Men’. Locally Sir Sebastian had been hailed a ‘saint’ for his work with the poor people in the rundown cities and the locally imposed title of ‘saint’ had stuck after his death. Many rumours had attached themselves to the house over the years, of ghosts, ghouls, murder, torture and suicide, and although no one had ever come forward with evidence the rumours still persisted.

The influence of the nuns remained heavy on the school as did Sir Sebastian’s, and pictures of the Mother Superior and Sir Sebastian hung from many walls in many rooms, all with thick brass frames blackened through the years with stories and secrets. The Christian teaching remained as strong as ever under the guidance of the Headmaster, Dr. Hugh Gerald.

Most of the boys went to their family homes for the long summer holidays, and a few of them lived overseas. Only a few boarders stayed at the school during the holidays, the ones unlucky enough not to have family that could or would care for them. Only a part of the school remained open for them but they managed to entertain themselves.

Two miles north-west of Saint Sebastian’s sits a little village built from local quarry stone. Twenty-two houses, a shop, a post office and a pub made up the little hamlet of Stoneden. In the summer when, for the year boarders, school rules were relaxed, pupils were allowed to either walk or cycle to the village to use the hospitality facilities. Any boy over the age of sixteen was allowed in the pub as long as he caused no trouble. The landlord had been in the Army, serving twenty years and completing many tours in Northern Ireland as well as many other places around the world. He didn’t take too kindly to anyone causing a fuss in his pub and had been seen to lift grown men up by the scruff of their necks and throw them onto the road outside.

Tradition also played a big part in school life and prefects were still used, and despite an attempt to change the name to house leaders, the term ‘prefect’ was traditional and fitted with the school’s image and was therefore kept.

Michael Dawson was one such young man. A boy who stayed at Saint Sebastian’s for the duration of the summer. He was now sixteen and about to spend his sixth and final summer in the school, wasting away the hours in the library or in the huge grounds. Out of one hundred and sixty-eight boys, thirteen stayed the whole summer which was just enough in number to have a game of rugby, football or cricket, but because most of the teachers and housemasters went on holiday or went home, the boys were mainly unsupervised. Dawson had been made a prefect for his last year and a half at the school, so as the only prefect to stay on site, he would be responsible for them.

Prefects were a link between teachers and pupils and had their own discipline to implement on the boys, as being head of houses was a huge responsibility. Each prefect wanted their house to be the best and if it wasn’t, the housemasters were not happy and would punish the prefect. In turn the prefects would punish the boys. In term-time, the prefect’s room would, by the Headmaster’s kindness, be filled with chocolate biscuits, tea, coffee and books. Dawson would sneak out the chocolate and give it to the younger boys who were homesick. He had been known to sit with an eight-year-old junior all night to comfort him. He was by far the pupils’ favourite prefect. Once term-time had finished, he would allow all the thirteen summer boys to have access to the prefect’s room.

The prefect’s room was on the second floor of the school, at the front overlooking the driveway and the sports fields. Dawson would often stand at the window looking out. The rugby field sat to the right of the long straight drive which, just in the distance, stopped at what was once the gate house. It would then continue its journey into the woodland and out of sight. To the left of the drive were the cricket pitch and football pitch which gradually joined to the school gardens, enveloping the building and becoming as one. There were stone walls, some used as boundaries and some for ornamental purposes, covered in Euonymus Fortunei and Pyracantha, some with gaps in the stones where students would sit and read or study. Dawson could see the sports hall way down to his right creeping out from the corner of the chapel. The side windows of the chapel at night would light up showing pictures of the disciples. Dawson knew that the first window was St. Peter, a picture that fascinated him. St. Peter, old and grey, stood looking up with his right hand palm facing up. Surrounding the top of his head was a yellow glowing halo. Dawson would spend the sixty minutes in chapel on a Sunday morning wondering what St. Peter was doing. Once decided that he was talking to God as he was looking up, he wondered what he would be saying.

The chapel occupied the ground floor of the east wing with huge stones on the floor, all square and in line creating a pathway to the altar, above which a huge arch-shaped, stained glass window sat. There were various things going on in the window, but the main section fitted into the arch at the top was Jesus himself, dressed in blue robes with his arms folded neatly across his chest. His long dark hair flowed over his shoulders and yellow stars surrounded his head with rays of sun shining from behind him. It was the most magnificent sight when sat in chapel, although lost on the boys of the school who took no interest in such splendour. Sir Sebastian had had it specially made from a window he had seen in Italy on his travels in 1780. There was also a stone font sat near the entrance which had become the visual centrepiece at the back of the chapel and something you had to walk past every time you entered for prayers. The pews made from dark oak would creak away like trees in a forest blowing in the wind whenever someone sat on them.

The rest of the ground floor was taken up by the dining hall, library and the Headmaster’s daytime study. Dormitories were on both first and second floors in both the east and west wings. A wooden staircase started its journey from behind the library on the right, passing Dr. Gerald’s study whose door was always open. It was impossible to sneak upstairs without being seen by the Head. There was a second staircase behind the chapel which was for prefects only. Classrooms were sited all over the school on different floors and of all different sizes.

The school had a routine which was strictly adhered to and only on the word of the Head would any activity or timing be changed. Outside each dormitory the list of times was displayed in a dark wooden frame as though decreeing the law of the land. The majority of boys were happy with the times as they were not unreasonable. Getting up at 07:15 was not much different to being at home and the knowledge that a professionally prepared breakfast awaited them seemed to spur them on. There were very few mutterings from the boys on a morning which, if heard, were quickly quashed by the prefects.

On a Saturday morning, the school minibus would do a couple of runs into Stonedon for any boy wanting to visit the shop and spend pocket money which was given by parents to the school and distributed in turn to the pupils. Most parents would set up agreements with the school on how much their child, or children, was allowed each week. Dr. Gerald would tell parents when they first visited the school as prospective parents that he would decide whether the pupils would get the money or not based on behaviour. Dr. Gerald would remind them that, as the name of the school suggested, he would turn them into young men.

Most boys would put their names down for a place on the minibus into Stonedon on a Saturday and buy books, comic and sweets. The daily school routine was relaxed on a Saturday morning with boys being allowed to sleep in until nine o’clock. The first minibus would leave at ten o’ clock and the last one back would leave Stonedon at two o’ clock. Some boys would walk there and get the bus back as they would want to race upstairs to their dorm and eat the sweets or read their comics. Saturday was the day to catch up with friends and family with each boy being allowed to make a ten minute phone call home.

Sometimes in the evening a film would be put on in the main hall for any boy wanting to watch it; not ideal or comfy with sometimes thirty boys sat round a television, but with sweets to keep them interested, it had for some become a highlight of the week. During the summer, the numbers were smaller and the view was much better.

Sunday was the day that most boys dreaded. All boys had to get up at half past eight and were to have had breakfast and be dressed in their dark-coloured Sunday suits for ten o’ clock. They would have to line up at the dormitory door in single file and be inspected by the dormitory prefect. He would look at each boy in turn checking that ties were fastened properly and pulled to the top. No gaps were allowed between shirt and tie, which was routinely checked by trying to insert the little finger between them. The white shirts had to be washed and ironed by the boys themselves and ties had to be black. There was a washing machine in the laundry room which was tucked away on the ground floor of the east wing down the corridor from the chapel, overlooking a large square grass area that sat nicely between the east wing and the west wing. The washing machine although larger than a household one, wasn’t big enough to get a whole week’s washing in and a dormitory rota system was put in place to ensure all boys had an allocated time slot to do their laundry. In addition to this, each boy had to strip his own bed, wash it and then remake it. The boys in the dormitory would do all the washing for their own prefect as well as other chores in the prefect’s room.

If any boy was found to have any imperfections with his Sunday chapel dress he was ordered to sort out the issue, thereby making the other boys late. Timekeeping was as important as drawing breath to Dr. Gerald and he would come down hard on any dormitory turning up late for anything, especially chapel. “You do not keep God waiting,” was often heard on many a Sunday morning, echoing around the ground floor outside chapel. The whole dormitory would be disciplined and lose house points rather than the individual boy being told off as it then became like a double punishment. A telling off from the Head would be pursued by fellow house mates having their say. This was known to be anything from practical jokes to boys having their head put down the toilet and the chain being pulled. Activities like these, accompanied by taking slats out of the bed so that a boy would fall through the base when he got into bed, became part of life at the school, and it was things like this that made the boys men, not just the education and the discipline of Dr. Gerald.

On Sunday evenings, after the evening meal, the boys would change from their Sunday suits and, after washing and changing, the prefects would gather them round for the daily bible study. This would involve looking at a passage from scripture connected with the sermon from chapel that morning. Each boy would give his thoughts on what it meant and how they could implement it into their own lives. One of the boys in each group would then have to speak about something that they had learnt that week or how God had helped them. After prayers there was a period of relaxation in their dormitories before preparing for the week’s schooling ahead of them. They would have to make sure that clothes were folded and left out ready for morning, shoes were polished and books were got out for lessons the next day. All this was checked by the prefects before lights out at nine o’ clock sharp. Prefects would gather in the prefect’s room where they would watch television until ten thirty when they would themselves turn in for the night. Their final job of the night was to check the dormitories. Any boy found out of bed and wandering would be punished. The art of sleepwalking was learnt effectively to avoid punishment by most boys within the first few weeks of arriving at the school. The prefects knew only too well the tricks of the trade having done them themselves to avoid punishment. They now were the administrators of that punishment.

# Chapter Two

Michael Dawson had hardly been at the school for long when he had to contend with spending the long summer there, when most of the other boys had gone home. He remembered every summer since that first one, stood at the windows on the first floor corridor almost above the main door watching car after car come up the drive and park on the gravel at the front. Boys would be stood waiting, with suitcases packed, for their parents to come. He would watch as the cases were loaded into the car and then as it went off on its journey into what had become the unknown to him. He would walk along the corridor and watch from the windows on the other side of the prefect’s bedrooms to see which window gave him the best view of the particular family that he was watching at a particular time. He would watch the boys coming out of the door with their cases and watch them struggle with the weight depending on age and size. Some of the boys would help each other but Dawson wanted no part in that. He would do anything for anybody at anytime but watching boys happy with the thought of going home for seven weeks was too much. Parents getting out of their cars and hugging and kissing their boys was something of the past for him and something which would never happen ever again in his life. He remembered that day six years ago, as though it had happened that very morning. It would always live with him and would occupy a thought or two every day, even now.

He came out of primary school that cold dark February afternoon to be greeted by his aunt’s friend. He had been staying with Auntie Rose since November the previous year whilst his parents worked in Zahlé in Lebanon as part of a Christian mission. It was a six month posting and something that they had wanted to do together, deciding to celebrate their birthdays as a time to return from the mission. William was an electrician for the council and had taken a career break to enable him to do it and his electrical talents were put to good use in the schools in Zahlé. Audrey was a dinner lady at a school but not the one Michael attended. She had gone as part of a Christian team to work in local hospitals.

Mrs Ackroyd was a nice quiet lady who lived next door to Auntie Rose. They did everything together, as Auntie Rose lived alone having never married and Mrs Ackroyd had lost her husband some years before. He had never known Mrs Ackroyd’s first name as even his parents had called her Mrs Ackroyd. Michael hadn’t expected to see anyone other than Auntie Rose at the end of school that day so it was a slight confusion to him. He walked along the road, which was straight but for a small bend, in silence, not daring to ask what was going on. They came to the end of the road and on crossing went through a small gap between two three-storey stone houses which opened up into ‘The Fold’. This was where Auntie Rose lived in a small semi-detached cottage, with hanging baskets on either side of the door and a window box on the stone windowsill of the kitchen window. There was a small garden to the back which Auntie Rose daily attended to in summer and made sure it looked nice in the winter months. Michael had no liking of flowers, plants or gardens but when he stayed there for a week during the summer when his parents were on a church retreat, he would sit in the garden whilst Auntie gardened or read a book. Auntie’s house was joined to a white-fronted, wooden-framed cottage occupied by Mrs Ackroyd.

The door was opened for him by Auntie Rose who without a word led him by the hand into a small living room. Sitting on the sofa was a man who Michael recognised as the Vicar from the church that Auntie Rose attended.

“Come and sit down, young Michael,” said the Vicar, who had a small flowered cup on a table next to him. Michael could see tea in the saucer surrounding the cup. He had sometimes seen Auntie Rose sip tea from her saucer and although never sure why, he never felt able to question it. Michael sat at the side of the Vicar whilst both ladies stood up in the doorway between the living room and kitchen.

“Michael, I have to talk to you. I need you to be very brave for me. Can you do that?” Michael, completely unsure of what he meant, nodded his head. He caught a few words that the Vicar spoke in his southern twang and although he was hard to understand at times, certain words jumped out. He heard something about an accident and a bus and that his parents were dead. He sat, head bowed, not understanding the full implications of what had just happened or what he should say. He knew what dead meant, as his pet French lop-eared rabbit called Ears had died just before mum and dad had gone away. He knew that not seeing Ears again meant that he would not see his parents again. He saw something fall onto his leg. His black trousers that he had worn for school that day now showed a small round dot on his leg. Another joined it, falling so close to the other but forming two dots like a pair of eyes. Another, and then another. He could feel dampness in his eyes and then on his cheeks. He watched as the water on his cheek dripped onto his leg. Slowly it became more frequent until his leg was soaked. He could feel his eyes scrunching up and then like a thunderbolt to his very existence, his heart broke.

His hand slammed into the cushion on the sofa before throwing it across the room, his head was thrown into the back cushion causing it to fall off the sofa. He could hear a noise that he had heard the Indians make in the cowboy films that he watched with his dad when they charge towards the Cavalry.

“Dad, why do they do that noise?” he had asked once.

“It’s to make themselves sound fierce to scare the other side,” he had been told. The noise coming from his mouth now wasn’t to make himself sound fierce or to scare anyone, it was something he had never known in his ten years. Complete and utter heartbreak.

His arms raged in all directions hitting the bodies of those around him, who were trying to hold him, trying to keep him still and in some small way trying to comfort him. He could hear voices but didn’t know whose they were, nor did he care. He had no interest in what people had to say anymore, he was angry with the world and angry with God for taking his mum and dad away, but most of all he was angry with Auntie Rose because she was the only person in the whole world that he had left.

The rest of that day didn’t register with Michael. Mrs Ackroyd had played her part in trying to console him as had the Vicar but Michael didn’t want consoling, he wanted his mum to come and give him a cuddle. He wanted to smell her perfume again. He wanted dad to ruffle his hair and say ‘alright scruff’, the words that he always said, but neither would happen, in fact they would never happen, ever again, and that damn well hurt.

Auntie was a strict woman in her forties, tall and slim. She had her long dark hair swept round and tied up on top. She wore big brown-framed glasses which quite often would perch on the end of her nose. She was forever pushing them back up towards her eyes but they never seemed to stay, falling almost immediately back to where they had come from. He watched as she read a book, not looking at him once. He wanted someone to ask if he was okay, someone to talk about what had happened but instead he had the pleasure of silently watching her read a book. He was so alone and sad. He felt the now familiar feeling of tears welling up in his eyes and watched once more as they dripped onto his leg. He tried so hard not to make a sound, but a whimper escaped from the corner of his mouth. Auntie looked at him over the top of her glasses, perched as usual on the end of her nose, and slowly lowered her book. She stood up and walked to him and bending down in front of him put her right arm on his left shoulder. She pulled him into her, positioning his head into her neck. He could now see drips of water coming from all angles, dripping onto him and the red and cream patterned carpet beneath. He knew that Auntie was crying too, it was the first time he had seen her cry or show any affection towards him at all. He wanted to stay there until the lonely feeling passed. Little did he know it would never leave him for the rest of his life.

The next day was back to normal within the house. Auntie had turned back into the stern aunt and Michael had in turn become the ‘spoken when you’re spoken to’ nephew. She didn’t think it appropriate for him to attend school that day, so he had been allowed to have an extra twenty minutes in bed. He hadn’t slept well. He had far too much going on in his head and had too many questions. He knew that he shouldn’t ask them of Auntie but there was no one else now so he had to find the courage to ask. His pillow, which had been soaked with tears, was uncomfortable for him to lay his head on and instead he had relied on his dressing gown rolled into a ball to support his head. He had managed to avoid making the noise that had taken him over earlier so he didn’t sound like a fierce Indian any more, instead he had quietly and reticently thrown his emotions deep to the bottom of his pillow. He didn’t want to trouble Auntie with it; after all she had lost people too.

The day disappeared into a blur with a stream of visitors coming to see Auntie, and him of course, but he didn’t know these people and the fact that they claimed to be friends of his mum and dad didn’t make the slightest difference to him whatsoever. Flowers were delivered to Auntie, big colourful bunches which were sat together on the kitchen table. There were cards attached to them but Michael had no interest in what the cards said or who they were from. The Rev. Walker popped in too to check how things were, which to Michael’s slightly confused mind, didn’t make sense. He knew how things were. They were awful. His mum and dad had died, but the Vicar knew that, so why ask?

The door to the lounge closed behind Auntie and the Vicar, and as hard as he tried he could not hear what was being said. He could hear a wailing sound which he knew was Auntie crying but couldn’t decipher any words. He knew his mum and dad had let him down because they said they would see him again, but that wasn’t true. They were supposed to be only going to help poor people who couldn’t help themselves, but what about him? He could still hear the words now coming from Dad’s mouth. He remembered Ears the rabbit and how he would eat a biscuit every morning. His hutch faced across the garden and once dad had erected a run, he could be let out on a morning and please himself as he could easily jump back into the hutch if he needed to. He would sometimes have a few friends in there too. Michael thought about the time that mum was cleaning him out and let out a silence-bursting scream.

“There’s a bloody rat in there,” she said. Michael remembered how much he had laughed at mum running round in circles panicking like mad about a rat. Dad was so calm and, after telling her off for saying bloody, he picked the rat up by its huge tail and flung it into the field at the back of the house. Ears didn’t seem to care, nor did dad, but mum was a different story; she always was a little more dramatic than everyone else.

The door opened and the Vicar walked out. Michael noticed that he almost had to bow his head to get through the doorway. He hadn’t realised how tall he was before, but he did this time, and grey too. He was closely followed by Auntie dabbing her eyes with a tissue. Rev. Walker turned back and reached out his hand to touch Michael on his head but Michael pulled away. That was what his dad did, and no one would ever be allowed to do that again because no one would ever take dad’s place.

# Chapter Three

Michael sensed something wasn’t quite right. There were a lot of telephone calls to the house and Auntie in turn was making a few calls herself. It was a few days before the funeral and Michael had helped Auntie carry the shopping from the little corner shop near her home. It was far more expensive but as Auntie reminded him it was nice to support local businesses. He knew it was more the fact that Auntie didn’t drive and the thought of getting taxis and buses didn’t really appeal to her. She would normally walk miles, but not when carrying shopping. Michael had heard Auntie talking on the phone last week about the difficulty in getting the bodies of his parents back to the United Kingdom from the Lebanon, and the harsh words she chose to express her frustration at the Foreign Office when passed from one person to another until she finally spoke with a very helpful man who made all the necessary arrangements. He knew that he shouldn’t listen to private conversations, but as the only boy and now head male of his somewhat small, two-person family he thought it didn’t matter as long as Auntie didn’t find out.

The days at school seemed to go unnoticed to Michael and although the teachers were aware of what had happened and were fully sympathetic and supportive, he just sauntered his way through the day. Playtimes were hard as he didn’t fancy playing. All the other boys played football and the highlight of the dinnertime playtime was Leeds v Liverpool. It seemed that half of the football playing boys supported Leeds United and the other half supported Liverpool, or some other team that entitled them to play against Leeds. As soon as the bell rang for dinnertime the boys would throw their lunches down their necks and then go into the playground where the chants of ‘Leeds v Liver, Leeds v Liver’ could be heard like the church bells calling the Sunday faithful to church, although this was to call the football faithful to play. As soon as there were enough boys, even number or not, to have a game of football, the game commenced. The playground at Greenside Primary School was a big grey tarmac, trapezium-shaped area with five-a-side sized goalposts painted onto the walls. It was on a slope so the top goals were painted on the wall of the back of the school and the bottom goals on the bottom wall. There was netting high into the air above the wall which would catch the ball and bring it back to earth if a boy suddenly decided to change to rugby halfway through and kick it over the top of the goals. In the top corner of the playground was a door leading to a toilet which was used as a dressing room for the team talks to make it more realistic, and some steps leading back up to the classrooms and the main hall. The girls weren’t happy with their toilet being used as the away team dressing room but they got used to having to wait to use it for the intended purpose.

Half way down the sloped playground on the right was a gateway in the wall leading to the school playing fields and more importantly the football pitch, which was the centre of the universe for many boys and the place where they would show off their social standing within the school, captain being the most respected, followed by goal scorers then goalkeeper. On match days, before the opposing school arrived to play a fixture, a few of the team would get the wooden football posts and crossbar out of the P.E. storeroom and carry them onto the school field and slot them in place into holes in the ground, then wait for the teacher to secure the crossbar into cut-out sections. Greenside obviously had some fixation with slopes as the football pitches were sloped too. There was one pitch that went from the top of the field to the bottom on the left hand side, which sloped down, and the one that went across the bottom sloped to one side, leaning towards the bottom of the field.

Michael, even at a young age, had noticed that the rules of the game were not adhered to in the playground and if he stood by the goal long enough all he had to do was tap the ball against the wall and he had got a goal. He soon became the top scorer at playtimes and someone who the Leeds players were proud of. This day was different. He didn’t feel like playing football, he felt like a dark cloud was hanging over him, he felt upset but unsure why. Apart from the obvious fact that his mum and dad were dead, there was something else. People merged into blurs around him and their voices became distant echoes tailing off into the midday hour. Girls’ screams around him went straight to the centre of his head and went round and round as though motorbikes on the speedway track, revving their engines higher and higher until the explosion blew him clean off his feet.

“Michael.” He could hear the voice but could not see anyone. He tried to open his eyes but felt sure someone was holding them closed. His arms were dead weights and his mouth unable to form any sort of shape enabling him make a sound that people would understand.

“Michael, can you hear me?” He tried again to open his eyes but although unsuccessful he managed to move his head in a small way to the direction of the voice. He groaned in answer to the question and thought that the person would have to try and make up their own mind as to what he was actually saying. He didn’t really know what he would say if he could have muttered a word or two anyway. The red on the insides of his eyelids was a bright rich red and he knew that a light was shining at him. He would often sit in class at school and scrunch his eyes tight and watch the dark red patterns take shape before him and then watch them change as he loosened the tight hold, the dark red turning lighter and then almost to orange just before they opened and he was back in the room.

“Michael, you’re in hospital, can you open your eyes?” He had already tried and failed and he wasn’t sure why he was being asked again. He could feel his eyes flickering and could see bits of bright light trying to get through his closed eye defence. He then felt a finger prise his right eye open. Through the bright light he was greeted by a man he had never seen before. His face was close to Michael’s and he was looking at him, studying him as though trying to look through his eye to the bottom of his soul.

“Can you tell me how you are feeling Michael?” the man requested. Michael wasn’t really sure what to say and could still only manage an ‘urrr’ sound. A lady was stood next to the man and Michael knew that she was a nurse due to her outfit, therefore he assumed that the man was a doctor. Gradually his eyes fully opened and the man shone a penetrating light into them and made a few ‘mmm’ and ‘arrr’ sounds as though communicating in a doctor language to the nurse at his side. They stuck things in his ears and under his tongue and under his armpit whilst Michael lay still and quiet just letting them do what they had to do, not because he wanted desperately to be compliant but because he had no idea what was going on.

A familiar voice was heard but no face to match as he still couldn’t turn his head fully, but he knew it was Auntie. “I really didn’t need this,” he could hear her say. “I’ve got far too many things to do.”

He didn’t know what she meant other than she didn’t want to be there. He wasn’t sure how he had got there so didn’t know if he wanted to be there or not. No one had told him anything and he certainly didn’t understand the doctor’s medical ‘mmm’ and ‘arrr’ sounds. He did feel peaceful though despite the efforts of Auntie to get answers out of the doctor who was being slightly more adventurous with his vocabulary. Maybe it was only for his benefit, the lack of words, or the fact that Auntie was a bit more demanding.

“I believe that he just blacked out. We have done a thorough examination and cannot find any reason why. I’m assuming you are his Grandma.”

“I most certainly am not!!” Auntie was furious. “I am his Aunt!” Michael tried not to smile at the doctor’s mistake. She had always thought she looked much younger than she was. Her voice had risen to a crescendo in three seconds flat, piercing the atmosphere in the room where the doctor was holding his consultation.

“My apologies,” the doctor said, trying to regain his composure to hide his embarrassment. “As I say, we cannot find any reason. I recommend that his GP be notified and if there are any more problems please bring him back.”

Michael was helped from the bed by the nurse whilst Auntie watched on. The roll of blue paper covering the bed tore off as he slid down the side and onto his unsteady feet. He watched as a solitary piece of the bed paper landed on the floor. The nurse wrinkled her nose and shook her head, which Michael knew she meant for him to leave it and he watched as she bent down and picked it up, putting it in the bin opened by a lever that she pressed with her foot. He smiled. He liked her, she was nice. She seemed to care, something void of him at present and he liked it. He turned as he was led away by Auntie, who hadn’t spoken any further words to the doctor as though in protest at his insult. He savoured the last smile from the nurse. The corridors of the hospital were long and never-ending. Signs pointed to different places on the way. There were a lot of them and Michael had no idea what they said but his confusion was cancelled out by an odd easy one like X-ray. He knew what that meant.

The exit brought Michael back to earth as the cold dark air hit the back of his throat and he took a gasp. The fact that his coat hadn’t taken the journey with him wasn’t his fault, but something he was now paying for. He shivered deep into his bones and could feel his teeth chattering together. He tried to stop it when Auntie sent him a disapproving look but the chattering continued. He soon understood why Auntie wasn’t happy, apart from the fact that she had said that she didn’t have the time to be coming there in the first place, she also had to pay for a taxi to get home. He knew she wouldn’t be happy as she did not like paying for taxis.

The journey wasn’t too long but it was a chance for him to warm up. The heat racing up the front window was warm; he could feel it in the back and could also hear it over the cassette tape playing away on the stereo. The driver was humming away to himself in time to the beat of the song, but the tune he hummed sounded like a different one. The driver hadn’t spoken apart from asking where they were going when he picked them up at the hospital. Michael had wished he had been quick enough to say it but Auntie almost barked out the address like a command.

“The Fold.” There were no pleases or thank yous like he had been taught to say, and she was the worst one for telling him off if he forgot. He remembered just before mum and dad went away, asking for a pencil.

“Can I have a pencil?”

“A pencil what?”

“A pencil.”

“A pencil what?”

“To draw with.”

“To draw with what?”

“A pencil.”

“A pencil what?”

Michael had been so confused that he walked away. He had wondered if Auntie had been joking with him as it didn’t make sense to him but then realised that he had never known Auntie joke about anything. Maybe an adult joke he thought but being ten he wouldn’t understand anyway. He decided to read his Beano as that wouldn’t cause confusion, unless he needed a pencil for anything.

Michael made a point of saying thank you to the driver as he noticed that Auntie hadn’t done. She practically thrust the money in his hand and walked off leaving Michael behind. Once he caught up with her, they were in the house and the kettle was on. Auntie had to have a million cups of tea a day otherwise she was miserable. He guessed that she had never had a million cups as she was always miserable. Mum used to say, “Oh it’s just Rose,” when her and Dad would discuss her, as though that was the excuse for her being as she was. Michael wasn’t allowed to comment although he was allowed to laugh along when they said things. The words ‘Ssshhh, don’t say anything, it’s our secret’ always followed and were used fairly regularly. Michael had no intention of ever telling Auntie Rose what mum and dad said, he completely agreed with them.

Michael lay on his bed exhausted by the day’s events. One minute he was at school and the next he was in hospital. A large blank separated the two events and it was something that he couldn’t fill. He thought it was nice of Auntie to come and pick him up and wondered what would have happened if she hadn’t, there wasn’t anyone else to have done it. Maybe the Vicar would have come as he had seen him a couple of times lately, or the strange man who had come a few days before. He didn’t know who he was and hadn’t spoken to him as he had been ushered out of the lounge and the door closed. Michael assumed it was one of the men from the church group as they often popped to have tea with Auntie.

The next day was spent with Mrs Ackroyd at her house as Auntie had said she had somewhere to go. He had watched from Mrs Ackroyd’s front window as a car pulled up outside and Auntie got in. Without even a wave or a look, she was gone.

Michael liked Mrs Ackroyd but she was quiet today. They did the usual things and got the old newspapers out. Michael liked to look at them. Significant events throughout her lifetime documented for all time inside a newspaper. He liked the Daily Mirror front page from August 17th 1977 that said ELVIS IS DEAD on the front with a picture. Dad liked him and played his records constantly. Michael only knew him because of dad but knew that he was dead. He wondered if his dad would bump into him now. A smile started forming on his face as he knew that dad would like that and the thought of dad being happy made him smile.

Mrs Ackroyd had all sorts of interesting things in her house and he was allowed to touch them, unlike at Auntie’s house where he was barely allowed to even look. There were black leather belts with brass horse designs hanging on walls and little trinkets on the mantelpiece and a guard on the hearth to cover the coal fire. She even let Michael roll up some sheets of newspaper diagonally and then fold them up, because it took longer to burn, and then put them under the coals ready for lighting that evening. Auntie wouldn’t even let him sit in front of the fire never mind let him help build it. He wished Mrs Ackroyd was his Auntie. If Auntie dies in a crash like mum and dad, he thought, he would live with Mrs Ackroyd and call her Auntie.

The day had started to get dark and the beans on toast that he had for tea had long since gone, before Auntie finally arrived home. He could hear the two ladies whispering but could tell that Mrs Ackroyd was upset about something. Auntie’s voice even as a whisper was still as dominant as ever and the whispered conversation ended. Michael went back next door after thanking his hostess for the day. She looked really upset, her eyes red and watery, but he knew that he would see her again so didn’t question it.