

## 2:BOY

Frederic awoke. He became gradually aware that he was in the wrong position - he was not in bed. As his vision, persuaded by the sunlight, returned, he remembered that he had been revising and that it had been dark when he was doing it.

It was a bright day. From the corner of his eye, he saw that the candle had burnt to its end, covering the candlestick in wax and sticking it firm to the table.

His head was resting on an open business textbook. He lifted it slowly. The page was stuck to his cheek; he clumsily brushed it off and sat up.

"Frederic," he could hear his mother downstairs. She had been responsible for waking him up.

He lifted his arms out and stretched; he could almost reach across the room. It was nothing but a wooden box above the coal shed. A few metres wide, with an old bed, a short desk, a clothes chest and shelf: this was his domain.

He stood up to get dressed but found this was already the case. He turned to the window to open the curtains but they had never been closed. This was a bit of a disappointment. He always loved to reveal the outside and let the light in.

The view from his room was quite stunning. Everything was down hill; he could see far beyond the company wall. He could see for miles and miles into the wilderness: the land of the unemployed. There was something about the miles and miles of emptiness, the freedom of the hills, the endless forests and grassy pastures that appealed to him. Not a building or factory or chimney in sight. It was a constant distraction from his work.

"Frederic," cried his mother again. She followed it up with a measurement of urgency, but Frederic didn't hear. He could see just across the field to his father and Mr Bradley, who were working by the pigsty.

The working day had begun.

The farm was less than half a mile from the company wall. This entire district was dedicated to farmland and for generations his family had been farmers or 'Agricultural Operatives' as they were now known officially but were never called that by anyone. There were few cars or machinery this far out to the company wall, that sort of money was not invested in the production of food stocks and was instead used in the factories and the offices toward the middle and centre circles. Most of the houses this far out didn't even have electricity.

It was a modest little place, mainly dealing with livestock. There were just the three of them working there. It didn't produce much for the company but it kept itself going.

It was uphill to the pigpen. Frederic carried the feed in a filing cabinet draw and struggled to keep a good grip on it. As he walked he looked again to the wilderness but from down here he

could only just about make out the hills and mountains far, far away. The tall and imposing company wall blocked all else from view.

“Come on Frederic, they’re hungry.”

Frederic sighed.

His father, Henry Smith, was getting on in years; he was somewhere between middle and old age. He was fit, having been a labourer all his life, though he was slightly overweight due to a heavy diet of ale. His skin was a shade of red thanks to too many hard days in the sun. He was like a tough old leather boot, worn well but with a lot of strength left in it.

Mr Bradley was the manager of the neighbouring farm. He could hardly look more different. Bradley was a thin, lean looking gentleman, who, despite his skinny frame, Frederic did not doubt was much stronger than his father. There was something vaguely surly and dynamic about him, somehow enhanced by his uncut jet-black hair and unshaven chin. He stood as he always stood, with a slight stoop. Today he was holding a wooden mallet.

“Always with his head in the clouds this boy,” said Henry as he reached the pen, a not very strong structure made primarily of broken desks and chair legs. Frederic leaned the draw on the gate, freeing one hand to open it.

“They were trying to get out again earlier. Luckily we caught ‘em.” He and Bradley had been replacing a damaged fence post with part of a hat stand.

“How are you lad,” asked Bradley as the pigs, having smelt their breakfast, came crowding around.

“I’m very well Mr Bradley,” Frederic answered, pushing snouts away with his foot.

“So I got this knock at the door, about last Wednesday,” Bradley continued. Frederic had interrupted the telling of a story. “And there was this gang of Security men waiting there, the supervisor told me they had to search my barn. So I said he was welcome to, not that they were giving me a choice.”

Frederic poured the draws contents into the trough. A large female shoved him out of the way up against the fence.

“So I let em in, they took a couple of my pitch forks and then went for the hay stacks, gave them a few sharp stabs and then after this screech these three unemployed leapt out. One of em with a huge gash across his face.”

Henry nodded. “It happened to Andy Mackay last fortnight, found em scavenging for eggs, chased em off with a rake and he mustn’t done any running for at least ten years or so.”

Frederic stood back up and brushed himself off. “What’s gonna happen to them?” he asked as he climbed over the fence.

“What’s gonna happen to ‘em,” his father scoffed. “They’ll be damn well flogged and chucked over the wall and it serves ‘em right. Work shy bastards.”

“Should string them up the lot of them.” Bradley swung his mallet down hard one last time upon the new fence post.

They stood silently for a moment, quietly watching the pigs fight each other for the food.

“Thanks for giving us a hand, if you hadn’t spotted em they’d be all over the bloody place by now.”

“That’s not a problem,” Bradley smiled.

“There was never any chance of this kid noticing.” He nudged Frederic who was once again staring dreamily toward the wall. Part of him wasn’t quite awake and sleeping on a book had done nothing for his neck and back.

“Always a dreamer eh Freddy,” said Bradley.

“That’s Frederic.”

“What?”

“Nothing”

“Well I can’t stand about here all day,” said Bradley stretching. “Got to do some training for the new lad.”

“Gonna give him a ride of the tractor?”

“Not until they send me some more of the tractor training brochures from the Supervisor’s office. Two months I’ve been requesting them, two bloody months.”

They both bid Bradley a good day and walked on back to the farmhouse.

“What do you think it’s like on the other side of the wall?” Frederic asked awkwardly, halfway back.

“It’s nowt but wilderness,” his father said quickly. “Full of unemployed, bandits and thugs, it’s practically a wasteland. They live like savages out there, like bloody savages.”

Frederic didn’t pursue it any further. It was strange but to him it didn’t really look like much of a wasteland.

“What’s that you got down your neck?” Henry asked suddenly.

Frederic hadn’t noticed that some of the ink from his textbook had come off onto his head.

Mary was washing up when her husband and son came in.

“I spent good money on those books. You’ve got pillows to sleep on!”

Mary was not a small woman: she was of thick build. Living on a farm seldom gave her time to be ‘lady like’; she worked damn hard for a living.

They both bent down to tug off their boots.

“I’ve paid good money for you to go on this course.”

“I know,” said Frederic. He struggled with his left boot and had to lean against the doorway, so as not to topple over.

His father took off his coat and sat down at the desk, at the centre of what was a simple kitchen: a sink, a large stove, a counter top and a fireplace. The teapot was already on the table;

he leaned over to grab a mug from the window ledge, and poured himself a lukewarm cup. "You're the first person in the whole village to ever get on this course."

"I know." They'd been through this many times.

"When I was a kid we only had one book in the house."

Ignoring him, Frederic managed finally to wrench off his other boot.

"Health and Safety: Correct Procedures for lifting Heavy Loads. That's what I was told it was it called, but I know one thing son and that's that I didn't go around sleeping on it."

"Henry!" Henry grumbled as she placed some toast down on the table. He picked up a slice and began to nibble.

Frederic went to join him at the table, but his mother was grinning at him.

"What?"

"I've got a surprise for you." She was smiling in a way that made Frederic more nervous than excited.

"I thought we were doing this tomorrow," his father said.

"I might need to do a touch of work," she answered. She went behind the curtain, which separated the kitchen from the hall, and quickly returned with a white box about twice the size of a shoebox.

She held it out in front of him, waiting for him to take it. Hesitantly, whilst trying to keep up a fake smile, Frederic took it slowly. Carefully, he picked off the lid, as if what was inside might well be dangerous.

"Well, you were going to need one for the next few weeks at least and I saw it in Mrs Anderson's shop window and knew it was perfect."

Under the lid there was a neatly folded suit. At least it once was a suit. It was old, brown tweed; the stink of mothballs hit him the moment he took off the lid. The elbows were badly worn; many of the seams had been re-sown and with the wrong coloured thread. It was the kind of suit only someone's mother could've bought. Something bought with the best possible intentions that couldn't be more wrong.

"Oh", said Frederic. "It's.....lovely."

"Oh I knew you'd like it." She did not for a moment sense any insincerity.

Frederic placed the box on the table. He lifted out the jacket and felt it with his fingers; it was very stiff.

"Ohhh go try it on, I might need to adjust it a little."

"Okay," said Frederic cautiously.

He picked up the box and went through the curtain and across the hall into the living room. It was a cramped room, with a tatty armchair and matching red sofa, which barely fitted in together. He took out the trousers; they were in no better condition than the jacket.

He sat on the armchair. As he stripped his clothes off, he could hear his mother and father arguing in the kitchen; they were forgetting to keep their voices down.

"I wish you'd leave off him," she hissed.

"This course is important."

Frederic scowled. He began to mouth along with his father.

"I'm sorry but I worry!" Frederic mimed. "This could be it for him; he doesn't want to be stationed here all his life. Farming for pittance."

Frederic sucked in his chest and gripped the jacket tight in his fingers, forcing the buttons through the buttonholes.

When the suit was finally upon him, he walked back into the kitchen with very measured and careful movements. He pushed aside the curtain, breathing very carefully; he was terrified that if he breathed out too suddenly, a button would shoot across the room and take his mother's eye out. But she still couldn't really see it. He was her beautiful boy and he was magnificently well-dressed and all grown up, regardless of how tightly bound his private parts might be.

"Oh look at you," she gasped "My little miracle."

"It's a bit tight," said Frederic helplessly.

"Nonsense," said his father, succumbing to similar sentiment.

"The sleeves are a bit short".

"They'll stretch," he smiled.

It was no good trying to argue. He had his new uniform.

He awoke the next day not feeling very refreshed. Mary had insisted that he have a good solid breakfast and issued orders that he was to do this before he put on his suit. The few alterations his mother had made had not made any actual difference, but thankfully she had managed to get rid of its previous aroma.

He took one last look at the view from his window before dragging his cases down the stairs. He had two suitcases. One was already ready, packed with careful supervision by his mother; the other he was filling himself mostly with his business and management books. He was grateful to his father, truly grateful, that he had taken the time to find the most recent and relevant titles, all on the reading list. He'd had no idea how much they had cost until he found himself eating cabbage soup for a month and caught his Dad rocking back and forth in his armchair, ale-deprived for weeks.

Outside the kitchen door his father was waiting with the horse and cart.

His mother gave him an extra tight "I don't want you to go" hug on the doorstep. Frederic wished her a warm goodbye before his father told him to get a move on.

Henry gave the horse, an old beast, a smack of the whip and it started a slow trot away.

Mary stepped back inside but she couldn't help but go up to the window and watch them both until they disappeared over the horizon. A tear appeared in her eye, she wiped it away. She tried to distract herself with the dishes.

As she was about to do so, she noticed a plant on the window shelf. It put tears in her eyes again. The small houseplant was growing and prospering not from a plant pot but a rather old looking blue boxfile, upon which was a very faded label, where the inscription JAL-LEK was just about visible.

The road was rough and full of holes. Henry was only taking Frederic as far as the village trading arena (village square). He would take the bus into town from there. It was a quiet day; there was no market but there were just a few small food stalls open.

On their approach Frederic could just about see the number 22 Bus driving in.

“There it is quick!”

His father whipped the horses and they gained speed.

The bus pulled into the arena next to the town monument: a tall stone filing cabinet in the shape of an obelisk, with each of the draws labelled, in large letters, with each of the four qualities of a good employee, Dedication, Reliability, Punctuality, Honesty (these four qualities has been redrafted and retargeted seven times since the monument had been erected).

Henry brought the carriage to a stop on the other side of the square. Frederic leapt out moments before, grabbing his cases hastily and almost toppling over with the immense weight of all his textbooks in one. He began to run.

“Thanks Dad,” he gasped, dashing away.

Fortunately, the bus lingered at the stop allowing Frederic the time he needed to climb on board. He gave the driver half a shilling for the fair, stuffed his cases into the small luggage area and threw himself down onto a seat. A few moments later and he was away.

It was an old, but well-looked-after double-decker; a hand-me-down from the central district where a new model had been introduced. A new model would be much better at taking care of the pot-holes bumps much better but these farming districts were never a priority.

It was a long journey to the school. It involved driving into the centre of town through the business district and then away into the residential estates - further into the centre of the company than Frederic had ever been before.

Farmhouses and fields faded into more congested gatherings of red brick houses, taller buildings and shops. Then after a few miles came the factories and warehouses. There were a few cars driving the worn cobbled roads lined with lampposts and pavements. Tall chimneys dominated the skyline, not that the sky or the chimney tops could be seen through the smoke. Men in fancy suits came out of offices carrying briefcases, shaking hands with colleagues in the street, tipping their bowler hats, tightening their ties... Men in overalls stood in front of their factories eating wrapped sandwiches with hands covered in muck and grease.

It was a different world.

The bus turned away from the industrial districts and took Frederic through a huge estate of terraced housing. With the exception of a few personal touches, a different colour of paint or a different design on the door, all the houses were the same for as far as Frederic could see. Each street was unrecognisable from the next.

As Frederic had asked, the driver shouted that he had arrived at his stop. He pulled his cases from the luggage bay and climbed off.

He had landed on another unremarkable street; the same houses went on forever until the distance was obscured by smoke. A few children kicked a ball in one street. It was quiet.

Then, as the bus pulled away, it revealed a building previously behind him. It read 'Merchant & Sons Business Management Education and Training Facility'. The main building was at least five storeys high; Frederic was not an expert on architecture, but it was a pretty ugly building he thought. He walked through the tall black gates, then across a long tarmac yard, before ascending the tall stone steps into the main building.

The reception area was big, with copious amounts of fake plants dotted all over. A red carpet led up to another red carpet running horizontally across it, leading down long corridors in either direction. There were two large doors ahead of him, through them he could see into a large hall. Gathered there were other young people who he assumed were the other inductees.

Hung from the ceiling was the company's moniker sewn upon a red tapestry:

"In profit we prosper,  
In effective organisation we have strength,  
Through efficient management we succeed."

"Can I help you?" snapped a hostile voice.

Frederic hadn't noticed the reception desk to his right. A peeved receptionist, wearing too much make-up, was looking at him.

He approached the desk. "Hello, I'm here for the business school induction."

She glared at him. "Name," she barked.

"Uhm, Frederic, Frederic Smith."

The receptionist picked up a clipboard and turned over several sheets of paper. "Smith, Smith, Smith. Frederic Jallek Smith." She glared at him again. "*Jallek* Smith?"

Frederic shuffled on his feet. "It's ancient for 'miracle Child'," he said quietly.

"You have the receipt for payment of fees."

Frederic pulled the invoice from his pocket to show her. She rubber stamped a form and gave it back to him.

She put down the clipboard, reached under the desk and produced a small envelope. "This is your room key. You need to sign for it here". She picked up a pen, handed it to him and held the clipboard out in front of him

Frederic signed. She then turned over several pages.

“Sign again there and print your name.”

“Okay.”

“Your full name.”

Frederic signed with silent protest and put the key envelope in his pocket.

“Sign again here to state that you have received your key.”

Frederic signed.

“The blue copy is yours.” She tore off the copy and gave it to him.

“Go through into the hall and take a seat.”

“Thank you”. He picked up his suitcases.

“Leave your cases here. They will be taken to your dormitory.” She rang a bell under the counter.

He walked into the main hall: a dark room with only a thin row of windows near the ceiling. The hall was half full of folding chairs that were mostly filled by other assorted young men, dressed as Frederic had feared, in ultra-modern, expensive suits made to measure.

As he walked toward the front of the hall, he looked at the grand paintings that adorned the walls. They were famous scenes from business history: the ribbon cutting at the opening of a new tower block, a corporate takeover, the presentation of a new desk...

Most of the students were sat toward the back of the collection of seats. There were plenty of seats in the middle, Frederic edged past several of them to get to a seat. He would rather not have done this – it drew attention to him straight away. A wave of sniggering and giggling and whispering became the background noise.

He sat down in the centre. The person sat in front turned around to look at him. He turned back around and laughed loudly, with the four or five students sat near him following suit. Frederic sighed. Then the boy turned around again. He was a pretty boy, with thick brown hair and self-satisfied, cocky look on his face.

“Hello there.”

“Hi,” Frederic answered cautiously; he was not about to make a friend.

“What’s your name then?”

“Frederic, Frederic Smith.”

“Ah Frederic.” He nodded, “tell me Freddy did your mummy knit that suit for you?”

His friends giggled. Frederic was about to answer back - but he did not get the chance.

“Quiet. Everyone quiet down,” demanded a voice. The whole group turned to look.

An elderly man strode in. He was tall, his skin and hair were exactly the same colour of grey. He used his long stride to climb the stairs up to the stage.

The students fell silent. Pushing back his mortar-board further over his head, he approached the dais. He straightened several pieces of paper already there and cleared his throat.

“Good Morning,” his voice was dry. “I am Charles Aston, principle of this institution. Welcome to Merchant and Sons Business Management Education and Training Facility. I must congratulate you all to begin with. You have all passed the first stage, your thirty-two applications were the best out of well over two hundred.” He was reading off the page with no inflections or enthusiasm. .

“This however, is only the beginning; we are here to find the crème de la crème. We are here to find the future executives of this company.” The boy seated closest to Frederic let out a loud, undisguised yawn. Those surrounding giggled quietly. Aston didn’t notice.

“...To this end, after this four week course all who pass will have proved themselves to possess a high standard of business excellence...”

The boy in front turned back to Frederic.

“Where do you come from, Fred?”

“From the south-farming district.”

“Really,” he said. “Your father must have grown a lot of potatoes to send you here.”

The Principal remained oblivious to the laughter while Frederic’s insides boiled.

“Yes, it’s just a shame your father couldn’t make enough money to buy you a new personality.”

Not a laugh. Not a snigger, scoff or giggle. The joke had died. The look on the other student’s faces... it was as if Frederic had just kicked a Special Needs Employee.

“...I would now like to introduce you to your teacher, our head of induction, who will be guiding you through this course. Please welcome Doctor Cribbage.”

“How dare you speak of my father?” snarled the boy. “You filthy peasant!”

“SILENCE,” barked a voice so terrible that the whole crowd jumped simultaneously.

Their teacher had arrived on stage. A fat, rounded, balding man with his remaining hair like wire wool dropped on top of his head. His tweed suit was worse than Frederic’s; a horrible bright beige colour, which was tightly wrapped around him like a second skin. His fat neck wobbled when he spoke and there was frizzy, dirty hair on his hands.

“No one talks when I’m talking. Nobody. You all understand!”

The crowd nodded furiously.

Cribbage walked down the stage steps, and then took a look at the new intake like a Sergeant might inspect his troops. He stank of tobacco.

“Is this it is it?” He marched in front of them. He turned around and walked back. “I’m not impressed, but I’m not impressed easily.” He stopped still half way back and stared at the crowd. “Standards get worse every year.”

Frederic looked him straight in the eye. Cribbage was looking right at him.

Their first lesson did not go well. To begin, Cribbage carefully drew out his complete and utter contempt for every single one of them. He went on to give them a brief history of the School and its prestigious past. This was so they could know the high standards they didn't nearly match up to. He then went over the timetable for the next eight weeks - he didn't approve of it.

Half way through the lesson, something struck the back of Frederic's head. There was a round of sniggering.

It was that boy again. Their exchange of words in the entrance hall had led to some not very subtle goes at tripping him up on the way from there to here. Frederic grimaced, determined to ignore them.

"Right," said Cribbage. "We're starting with the basics. Most of you should know this. This will give you a chance to show me you know your stapler from your spreadsheet."

A second rubber band flew over his head and struck the chair-back of the student sat in front. That boy, what was he called? Scarrit, Scarrey, Scally, it was something unusual, though he quite preferred it to Jallek.

"What is management? There are many definitions. It has been described as 'forecasting, planning, organising, commanding, coordinating, and controlling. The social process of planning, coordination...'" Cribbage chalked the definitions on the blackboard aggressively.

Another band hit Frederic's ear – and stung.

Frederic turned around so quickly that he forgot the 'ignore him' strategy. The boy was looking away falsely. His gang were giggling. What had he done to deserve the attention of all these admirers?

Cribbage had not noticed and was still hitting the chalk against the board.

"As 'organisational direction of work based on...'"

This time a paperclip was the offending object. It was fired with particular accuracy, just striking the very edge of his ear. The sting made Frederic, without thinking, spin around. "Will you stop it!"

The class went silent. All eyes now on Frederic. The boy whose name definitely began with an S, grinned.

"SMITH," yelled Cribbage. "What the hell are you doing?"

Frederic quickly turned back around, but already Cribbage was upon him. His horrible face, with its red dead skin, loomed over him.

"WHO THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE INTERRUPTING MY LESSON?"

"I'm sorry sire."

"Do you have some problem with the way I'm teaching this lesson?"

"No sire."

"Know it all do you!"

"No sire," Frederic began to sweat. "That boy was shooting paperclips."

“IT WAS YOU INTERRUPTING MY LESSON BOY!” Cribbage looked close to exploding. “Seeing as how you think you can hijack this lesson you can answer me some questions. That way we can all benefit from your ‘vaast’ knowledge.”

“I never meant to...”

“DON’T INTERRUPT ME”.

Frederic gulped.

Cribbage went silent. He leaned back and sucked in his cheeks. “Answer me this. What are the Peter’s and Waterman’s Seven S’s of good management?”

Frederic looked toward the blackboard to ignore Cribbage’s glare. He knew this; it was at the back of his mind, he just had to bring it forward. The Seven S’s, the Seven S’s.

“We’re all waiting for you!”

“Structure,” cried Frederic, the words firing from his mind then directed through his mouth. “There’s structure, strategy, systems, shared values, skills, style and...” He was reading them back from memory but was one short.

“I know,” cried another student, flinging up his hand.

“Quiet! I want Smith to answer.”

Structure, Strategy, Systems, Shared Values, Skills, Style and, and...

Cribbage opened his mouth to yell at him. It opened as if in slow motion, his thick tobacco breath spilling it out...

“Staff,” burst Frederic. “It’s staff”.

Cribbage closed his mouth and glared at him. Then he moved in close to Frederic. His breath flew over him again. He was right up against Frederic’s ear; Frederic didn’t want to face him.

“You had better sharpen up boy.” He was not whispering; everyone could hear him. “You’re not on the farm any more. This is civilisation and if you don’t like it you can go back and shovel shit for all I care.”

Cribbage walked back to the front of the class.

“Now as I was saying before Smith interrupted...”

Frederic looked down at his desk. The snigger chorus continued...

The canteen was painted orange. Frederic had never seen a room painted orange. He was used to white-washed walls, or just brick or stone. None of the others seemed to notice. He felt so uncomfortable. So out of place.

And as for the spread... Living on the farm, Frederic was used to fresh vegetables and if it had been a good week, his father would slaughter a chicken for them to eat. More than often the only meat they got was tough and stringy, from animals that were too old to be sold or put to work. But there were all kinds of succulent meats here, and foods that Frederic had never even heard of.

What on earth was Lasagne? Risotto? Pizza - wasn't that foreign? Curry looked revolting, whatever it was. One student was complaining about the spread and the quality of the food. Frederic had never seen such a feast. He was almost afraid to take it. There was this feeling, deep down, that said to him that this wasn't his kind of food that it wasn't for him. He didn't like this feeling.

He became quite angry. He marched back to the counter labelled 'Starters' and took one of the bowls and filled it up with tomato and tarragon soup and placed it on his tray as a mark of defiance. He then asked for a lasagne as if it were something he had on a daily basis, scowled when he was corrected on the pronunciation, and approached the till.

The dinner lady gave him the look of disapproval he was beginning to get accustomed to. "One shilling and sixpence," she barked.

Frederic eyes opened wide. He'd got carried away.

"I've only got a shilling," he said, embarrassed.

The dinner lady exhaled frustration.

"I could tip the soup back."

"That's ok," said a friendly voice.

Next to him in the queue, was a jolly looking man with a rounded face and a portly posture. He reached forward and gave the dinner lady enough money for them both casually - money clearly was not an issue for him.

He smiled at Frederic.

"Thanks," said Frederic smiling back awkwardly.

"That's okay Fred."

"It's Frederic."

"What?"

"Not Fred, or Freddy boy, or Smith, it's Frederic!"

A number of people turned to look at him. The boy's cheerful expression fell.

"I'm sorry," Frederic said quickly, before it dropped completely.

"It's okay," he said after a moment. "They don't like me either. You want to get a seat?"

Frederic nodded.

The new intake were all huddled up at the far end, by the window; Frederic and his new friend sat at the other end.

"I'm Brian, Brian Turlington."

"Frederic Smith."

They put their trays down and sat. Frederic was silent, not really knowing what to say.

"Why do they hate you?" he asked eventually.

"My application wasn't accepted; I only got in because some other guy dropped out". He pointed to the S named boy across the room. "He and Scarrey were friends".

Scarrey - that was his name. What kind of name was that?

Frederic looked around at him. Scarrey was commanding an audience. Everyone around him was giving him their full attention. Laughing at his every joke. Taking in his every word.

Frederic hated him. "Just who does that he think he is," he scowled.

"You don't know?"

Frederic shook his head.

"That's Executive Thompson's son."

"Executive Thompson." Frederic took a moment to think. Executive Thompson - that was a name he knew. Then he remembered. "That Executive Thompson." His eyes opened wide as he remembered. No wonder all the others wanted to be near him.

Thompson was the youngest executive on the board, a high flier, rumoured to be close to the Vice President. Thompson was Executive in charge of education, the chief Governor of the school. Scarrey could afford to be confident; he would surely become a full time student. No wonder all the other kids were trying to get as close to him as possible.

Frederic's stomach turned. Scarrey did not like him; just how impartial was his father going to be?

"Eurrch," said Brian, tasting his soup. "I don't think much of this."

Frederic shrugged his shoulders; it tasted fine to him.

He picked up the pepper to sprinkle on his food. But as he tipped the pot, the cap dropped off and all the pepper poured over his soup. It became a cloud, which drifted across the table toward Frederic

Scarrey and his friends broke into hysterics. Brian slammed his spoon down and scowled at them.

The smell of pepper drifted up Frederic's nose. His nose muscles contracted, and then he gave an almighty sneeze. His head went so far forward it almost landed in his soup.

His eyes were watering. He shook his head and sat himself up straight, rubbing the end of his nose.

Brian was staring at him. Frederic smiled at back, but he was glaring at his chest. "What?" he asked.

"What's that?"

Frederic looked down. His lucky charm was showing.

Brian could see dangling from Frederic's neck, a faded golden key, hung on a simple chain.

"Oh, it's my good luck charm," he said dismissively. "My mum, uhm, gave it to me when I was a baby." This was true. His mother had given it to him when he was old enough not to put it in his mouth. Frederic smirked, "It's never brought me much luck, mind you."

"Oh I dunno," said Brian. "A farmer's son, studying here, that's no small feat."

"I like to think that was down to hard work," Frederic said without smiling. "But if you're right," he looked back at Scarrey. "Let's hope one miracle deserves another."

\* \* \*

The afternoon dealt them another unpleasant three hours with Cribbage.

His teacher deliberately went out of his way to antagonise him. Frederic did his best not to rise to it. When he stuck his up hand to answer a question, he refused to acknowledge it. When he kept it down, Cribbage deliberately chose to ask him.

It was followed by a tour around the grounds. They were shown around the classrooms and study rooms, the small gardens and the gymnasium. Frederic was very glad of Brian during the tour. Had he been wandering around by himself he'd have been even more of a target.

Scarrey paid him little attention that afternoon. But his expression, whenever they had eye contact, suggested this was only temporary.

Frederic particularly enjoyed seeing the library. It was not the vast shelves of knowledge for him to consume and go through, nor was it the possibility of reading fiction, instead of academia, that inspired him. It was the blissful quiet. Other than the sounds of the animals, the farm was almost silent but for the wind. On entering the library he found a place, within a hostile environment, where he might even be able to relax.

The tour ended with an hour long talk on Fire Safety and Emergency evacuation procedure for each of the buildings, which included a test on which fire extinguishers were present in the college, how they should be used, and where the assembly points were should the building have to be evacuated. Afterward they were then taken back to their dormitories.

They were small rooms, each with two bunk beds. Frederic's cases were dwarfed by the large trunks brought by the other three sharing with him. All three were disciples of Scarrey. But rather than torment him, they decided to ignore him as best as possible. That hurt, but it was better than antagonism.

Frederic chose not to spend his evening there. He spent a few hours reading books on the subjects he predicted would come up in the next day's lessons. He would be prepared for Cribbage.

It was getting dark when Frederic was asked to leave the library, as it was about to close.

He departed for his dormitory. He hoped the others would not be there. He felt the need to be alone, not that he knew how to find Brian even if he wanted to.

He trotted down the stone stairs and went around the side of the building. He found himself suddenly faced with Scarrey Thompson. With him were four others, none of whom looked friendly.

Frederic tried to walk around them, but they were determined not to let him pass.

"Going somewhere?" asked Scarrey, restrained.

"I was just going back to the dorm."

"Not just yet, we have something to settle".

One of his friends rolled up his sleeves.

“You said something about me and my father.”

Frederic took a step back. Scarrey’s gang stepped forward.

“I think you should go home and never come back.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said. He turned around and legged it. Scarrey’s gang went after him

Frederic should’ve had a clear advantage; none of the others were nearly as fit as he was. But as he ran his tight trousers constricted his movement and his long stride shrunk and he struggled to stay ahead.

Frederic could see a small gate ahead of him, across the yard. He forced himself forward and went for it. His suit was slowing him down badly and the chasers were gaining on him.

Then, just as he was about to run through the gate, Frederic saw a blue shape - a man shape. He couldn’t stop in time.

He and the blue dressed figure collided, both tumbling onto the ground.

Frederic rolled onto his side. Scarrey’s gang all stopped in the gateway almost falling over each other. Several of them gasped, and not because of exhaustion. Frederic took a look at the man he had knocked over. He was once a smartly dressed man, with light brown hair, no older than early forties. The face was familiar...

It was Executive Thompson. Frederic had seen him in the Company newsletter and he looked just like Scarrey.

Frederic scrambled to his feet. “I, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” He went to help him up.

“No, no,” insisted Thompson. Frederic sprung backward as he leant against the wall and pulled himself up. Scarrey’s mob stood with jaws-a-dropped before Scarrey himself pushed his way to the front. On seeing his father, his face went white.

“What’s going on?” said Thompson sternly.

Frederic opened his mouth.

“We were playing a game father,” said Scarrey quickly.

Thompson tried to straighten his collar. “I wasn’t aware I was sending you here to play games, Scarriford.” He looked Frederic over once, up and down.

“I’m sorry, father”, Scarriford’s eyes were on the floor.

“Come along, let’s not waste any more time.” Scarrey walked through the gate and stood next to his father.

“And you,” Thompson pointed to Frederic. “What is your name young man?”

“Frederic Smith Mr Executive sire,” said Frederic very quickly.

“You should take better care to look where you are going, Frederic Smith.” Thompson put his hand on his son’s shoulder and led him away.

Scarrey’s followers stood silent, watching in awe as the pair walked away. Frederic was not quite so affected, seeing the chance to quietly slip away.

Thompson took his son to the street corner. There, a black limousine was waiting for him. As he approached the door opened.

“What was all that fuss about?” asked Godric, sitting comfortably inside.

“It was nothing. Just my son playing when he should be working.”

Godric spotted Frederic walking quickly away in the distance.

“Is that a student?” he asked curiously.

“Yes. It seems they’ll take anything these days.”

Frederic had to walk all the way around the building to get back to the dormitory. After turning the first corner, he took a moment to catch his breath. He leant against the wall for a few moments to slow his gasping for air. He tugged his sleeve as far over his hand as he could and then used it to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

“Problems in paradise?”

Frederic stopped still, and turned around slowly. Behind him stood two men; about the same age as him. Frederic was surprised to find that he knew both of them.

It was Michael and John: the twins. They lived in the village and worked for their father in the local shop. They were practically identical, both tall and strong except that Michael had brown hair and John was blonde.

“Michael, John, hi. What are you doing here?”

“Oh we were just having a walk and...”

“We’re just passing,” said Michael loudly, John quickly fell silent. “How is life in the fast lane?”

“It’s... it’s going well.”

Michael took a step closer to him.

“That ain’t what it looked like. You don’t belong here, Frederic. Not with this lot. You know it, they know it.”

Frederic matched his glare, “I’m here to better myself. I don’t care what they think.”

“Oh you’re better than us now are you?” Michael took another step forward. He and Frederic were close, staring eye-to-eye.

“That’s not what I said.”

“I know what you said.” Michael turned on his heels. He took a few steps back and stood next to his brother.

“You don’t sleep with the enemy Fred. You fight them and you keep on fighting them until...”

John nudged his brother in the chest. “Michael! We should be getting on home.”

Michael smirked. “You’re right, we should be leaving. See ya Freddy.” His eyes were still fixed on Frederic. Then he strode forward, knocking Frederic aside as he past.

John sighed, "It was nice to see you Fred." He then scampered after his brother.

Frederic stared up at the mattress above him. His roommates had stopped talking when they heard footsteps outside.

"Lights out," yelled the warden down the corridor. A moment later and the door opened slightly, a hand came through and turned off the light. The electric light! And yet people still complained.

Once the footsteps died away, conversation recommenced.

"Well, father received the honorary finance award last year for increasing profits without making significant cutbacks."

"Well my father was considered for the managing directorship, of the whole records division."

"My Uncle *is* the director of the records division..."

Frederic rolled over and tried to ignore them.

Just what was he doing here with all these people?

He hadn't really known what to expect, but he hadn't expected this kind of hostility. But he'd only ever been out of the village a few times. Maybe, he should've stayed in his own district. Maybe Scarriford and his cronies were teaching him a lesson he would only learn in the long term anyway.

He was here because his father had noticed from an early age that he was pretty smart, and naturally he wanted the best for his kid and he'd had a good harvest, made some extra money. And Frederic himself had been committed, worked hard, done his best. Maybe deep down he'd perhaps wondered if he really wanted to go into management. But his father had been so keen and like he said, why work in the dirt when you've got the wits to go further?

But here and now that philosophy gave him little comfort. His fellow students hated him for being beneath them, and now his friends hated him for thinking himself above them.

But how he'd love to wipe that filthy look off Cribbage's face, and that smug smirk of Scarriford's. And as for John and Michael, they were just jealous. They were stuck in their cramped little corner shop while he was going out into the company going for something better. And just what the hell were they doing lurking around the school anyway?

The boy lying above him started snoring.

Frederic turned over onto his other side and pulled the duvet up around his head.