

CHAPTER ONE OF A GLASS ROPE

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1. A former pupil mugs me and I meet my sister's posh for the first time

A sick pain novocained the back of my head and I found myself flat on the gravel. Someone had hit me.

I was following the freewalk yesterday, remembering a time before I knew the names of things: building, story, finger, SatCom, ASEAN, keypad, door, father, foot.

I sometimes remember a scene from before the time I'd learnt words: my mother's face peering down at me as I lay prone; the air sinuous with the odour of boiling milk, cumin and saffron; sun and window casting spreadsheet shadows in shades of grey on the opposite wall. Naming is our first step to understanding and control. Words cordon off territories in the vast continent of our experience to facilitate exploration. Yesterday I was trying to work out how I could remember things from a time when I had not been taught their names. I looked down at my scuffed and shabby shoes. They are a bad example to the flock. Good brogues are expensive - though cheaper than the latest sport styles with their chips, pedometers, and in-built warning and guidance systems - and I have to prioritise my expenditure carefully. Things have changed for the worse since I was on the programme or, at least, that's how it seems to me.

I went on to think about words' schizophrenia and evasiveness: cell, heart, ceiling and intelligence. Our colonisation of the world is halted at the boundary where we realise that words are not pebbles, and the things they refer to may be less concrete than they at first appear to our wondering child-aged eyes.

There are things for which there is no single word, only a phrase more or less accurately applied depending on the education, skill, and literacy of the speaker: the inchoate (undeveloped; just begun) feelings of which you are first aware, relating to your family and the room in which you become conscious; the emotions you feel for your mother, father and siblings; the moment-by-moment spool of irritation, anger, happiness and the quiet glow of satisfaction at a job well done. There is nothing praiseworthy in having these feelings. Gurus preach that the refinement of sensibility (the capacity to feel physically or emotionally) is the royal road to whatever nirvana they promote. My view is different. To describe, discuss and understand these feelings rather than merely to experience them is the complex of abilities which requires development, tending and nurturing for its own sake; expression's full flowering is worthy of great praise and preferment in the world.

'The unexamined life is not worth living' though I am not an antiquarian looking back nostalgically at the golden age of psychoanalysis, bemoaning its complete and utter defeat as an intellectually respectable practice. Analysis and therapy were the turbulence thrown up by a passing army of Judeo-Christian zealots and no one would want a resurgence of those creeds, nor can it be imagined despite their continuance as popular superstition, as folk poetry.

Subject matter is irrelevant. The ability to use words with discernment on any matter was the fundamental lesson I learnt as a member of the first true cohort, while studying for the Final Cull, living with my family in Spitalfields - when I first met Nathan.

From words, shoes, human history and cultural change I moved to think about my family. It is this capacity to switch easily from the general to the particular (and vice versa), from one subject to a connected but distant one which I prize as a gift, which refutes those who criticise the Cull network as an outmoded or inhuman phenomenon, or even those like Nathan who saw it as a sinister conspiracy. My studies on the programme were synonymous with becoming conscious. Now I am a Cull tutor, that role is my life, my vocation, my means of understanding. Far from narrowing me, it has broadened me. Far from forcing me in one direction, it has taken me to a meeting place of many roads. Far from over-emphasising the brain at the expense of feeling, it has given me the words to understand the promptings of my heart, express them to others, examine them, develop those which are valuable and discard others which are destructive. It has given me a vocabulary to think and to feel; to think about feeling. It has allowed me to refine my skill in discrimination, which is crucial for those like me whose emotions are flickering, evanescent (fading from sight, disappearing), gentle rather than tempestuous, fully expressed or violent.

I don't use a web or grid dictionary, preferring the Oxford Dictionary of Current English in the last paper edition published ten years ago. It might seem an affectation but I feel more comfortable with it. Words are live things and a book is more alive than a screen - or so it seems to me.

My family's history is the history of war. I have often thought that. My grandfather was in the international invasion force that moved across the border from Saudi Arabia to what was then Kuwait, fighting the army of what was then Iraq. Thinking about that war now puts it in its true perspective politically and socially but that is no help in recovering the inward experiences of the people involved, particularly as their view of humanity must have been so different from how we think of ourselves now.

As was the case with so many, my grandfather lived his remaining years in increasing ill health due to the effects of chemical and biological agents, though the reasonable financial settlement and his overwhelming experiences fuelled a wanderlust which first took him back to the old battlefields, then to the Hashemite Kingdom, then to Egypt - when the monuments themselves were still open, before the building of the replicas and the V R Centres reduced the country to what it is today: a civilisation with a largely virtual history. Here he met my grandmother. How he managed to arrange her emigration is unclear, but he did, and my father was born in Spitalfields on the eve of the Balkan struggles, six months before my grandfather died. But conflict stretched even further back: my grandfather's father was in Aden, and when he was nineteen had sailed with another international invasion force that cleared Europe of the German socialists. He landed at Omaha Beach and was decorated for bravery.

One evening during a geo-political history component my Cull tutor, Mr Gibson, said the following:

" During those 200 years, Western countries exported an integrated culture which embodied a particular justification of knowledge coupled with monotheistic religion and democratic models of government. They recruited the rest of the world - which was how they categorised it - into their local squabbles and dragooned it into two so-called world wars and one global ideological battle. However, the end of the Cold War was their final curtain. Before it, the population of the world was asked ' Which side are you on ?' In the aftermath, the self-posed question was 'Who are we ?' It was realised that there were many different answers; not as many as there are

individuals in the world - that is another post-Enlightenment assumption which has been questioned and found wanting - but certainly many more than were considered possible within the worldview of one powerful yet, as it now becomes clear, aberrant civilisation."

We learnt shorthand of course. The notebooks are pugged away somewhere though I actually haven't had to refer to them in this case. My electronic files are irrecoverable without the use of archaic operating systems. That antiquarian translation service is beyond my means since the funding cuts.

Yes, my family history could be viewed as tracing and retracing war's pilgrimage round the world.

My father met my mother in her father's Chinese take-away restaurant. The premises were burnt down three times as revenge for my maternal grandfather's refusal to pay protection to the Cyber-Tongs.

As I walked back from work yesterday I thought about these events for a while, then realised they were also a history of crossing those boundaries which cause war; of - how can I put this - a reduction in differentiation. If one of my family's axes follows the stream of world history, the other swims, it can be argued, laterally across the tide. We are a family of soldiers - or at least we were until my father's time - who married our military, cultural and economic enemies.

I was thinking this, or some more primitive version of it, when I was hit on the back of my head.

Earlier in the afternoon I had been invigilating a cohort during a self-study period. I was sending out comments, pointers, criticisms when one of their replies made me pause.

"I've read the dictionary." It was Naj from Islamabad.

The eye-to-eye had gone down. This technological lacuna (gap or missing part, especially in a manuscript) gave me less to concentrate on, with 203 present flock at terminals and up to 50 on the screen bank. VR would have helped me to create the illusion of intimacy; it aided entres in the 20s when it became the norm for business, but we had only just started to introduce the infrastructure for full VR into Cull programmes when last year's funding review started. Until that is resolved there will be no progress. We're always ten technology waves back, maybe a hundred.

"I've read the dictionary."

There's no real reason for Naj to use a UK tutor centre, it's just that some people wallow in idealised historical values and force these odd little connections. Her father's middle name is Mountbatten and he played cricket at college; a wily leg spinner and a decent late-in-the-order batsman. His file states that he was a successful Net programmer for Multiware but the work dried up just after he found his wife was pregnant with Naj and, of course, there was nothing for him after that, so Naj qualifies for the Cull. Nowadays a lot of them are like her wherever they live: children of smart parents who slipped over the edge.

There are rules about tutoring. Because of my grandmother I qualify for the Islamic modules and therefore Naj can link with me. I even have an on-line student from Beijing because of my

mother, but that is extremely unusual; obviously most of the traffic is the other way, candidates linked up with the big nodes in Hong Kong and the Wild East.

She re-typed, " I've read the dictionary." I had drifted off for a second.

" Draconian ?"

" Very harsh, cruel. From the Athenian lawgiver."

" Finnan ?"

" Type of fish...haddock, cured in wood smoke. I don't understand 'cured' though."

" Septuagint ?"

" Let's not get into that."

Screen symbols carry tones of voice, or maybe it's imagination.

Her initial sentence finally struck me. " I've read the dictionary." I laughed, but then I thought, "That's what I did."

In some ways she resembles my younger self; she is the most committed of her cohort, the most fearful of failure. She is unusual in that she prefers a solitary print-based learning style; she has high motivation to succeed and her work ethic is in the top ten percent. Thinking style is convergent. Her ability scores are within the normal range; her attainment on the other hand regularly crosses the 90th percentile so, in loose language, you could describe her as making up what she lacks in natural gifts with intense application. There has never been a danger of her falling below the cut-off and we begin to think that she could, at the very least, move onto the Cull tutor programme once the Final Cut is made. Her area of academic weakness is a lack of commercial awareness and profit orientation.

My profile at age 16 was similar. The one obvious difference between us is her tendency towards sporadic rebellion - a slightly caustic attitude towards the programme and its officers as evinced in the message I had just read. I had none of this. Nathan dubbed me convert, devotee, acolyte, altar boy (not to mention brains and smarty pants) at different times when I refused one of his invitations, made impossible to accept by the exigencies (urgent needs or demands) of my Cull studies. At Naj's age I was deeply serious to the point of solemnity. Though my conditions have improved with age, though I do not have to prove my worth, though I carry with me a sense of quiet contentment at my achievements, at my elevation from what I was then to what I am now, I am still accused of humourlessness, an over-intense attitude towards life.

My defence against Naj's implied criticism is that I can't unlearn what I know; that my job is to communicate that knowledge; that the accurate meanings of words are a necessary precursor to success in my vocation and that if I therefore occasionally lapse into the pedantic, if I sometimes seem fuddy-duddy or make myself foolish without realising it, it is a price I am prepared to pay. Some would disagree with me.

Words are less important than they were even 50 or 60 years ago; in cultural and business sectors they are mainly used as adjuncts to symbols, diagrams, spreadsheets, databases, critical path analyses, mental maps and other non-verbal systems. The traditional relationship has been reversed; pictures were once prompts for the barely literate; words now serve to translate modernity for those trapped in an earlier, slower, serial mode of understanding. Thus the verbal reasoning scores necessary to enter on the ground floor of escalator jobs have consistently fallen, while spatial and abstract reasoning hurdles get higher and higher. The trend was apparent when I was flock but the rate of acceleration has increased.

"I've read the dictionary."

That she felt the need to write this endears her to me. Perhaps my devotion to words has held me back. It was old-fashioned when I was a teenager and many of my tutors warned me against it. Those of Nathan's friends who bothered to investigate my interests and opinions thought it hilarious (apart from Annie and Dr Grace that is - and how long is it since I've thought of them?), addicted as they were to the juxtaposition of images; to the short, sharp, shock; to the shape of things; to a process of becoming rather than to content, telos or origin.

My Cull tutor, Mr Gibson nursed an intense and largely private passion for books and from the second year on used to lend me those he thought appropriate: I remember him keeping me back at 8.30 one day and handing me a brown paper bag, muttering "I think you might like this". I was anxious to get home and work on the evening's projects so I forgot about it until a few days later when I unwrapped a paperback edition of 'The Naked Lunch' by William S Burroughs, printed in the 1990s, shortly after the author died. The title fascinated me. More than that I was overwhelmed at Mr Gibson's generosity in entrusting me with such a valuable and rare object. I never read beyond the first few pages though. I was too busy. Later he gave me a collection of poems from the 1960s but I lost it.

I am even more of an oddity than I suspect he was, occasionally wasting my time in reading good prose, a concept which, I must admit, does sound faintly ludicrous. And that I have started this....

But I'm jumping ahead. "I've read the dictionary." I thought about asking Naj if she liked the ending but I saw that she was working through the module on the algorithms of famine in the first decades of the century, and I was fascinated to see how quickly she was picking it up. She would misunderstand any levity. It is best to keep your distance. I have seen careers and lives blighted by the lure of easy familiarity. I turned to talk to the green lights; Naj continued to trawl the modules and the rest of the afternoon's events stayed within one standard deviation of normal until the incident during my journey home.

I tried to turn over but a foot restrained me. After a few seconds the pressure released and I twisted. There were about ten of them; in such moments facts fur round the edges and become cuddly creatures with surprisingly quick movements. My attackers' median age was, I guessed, around 11 or 12; predominantly Caucasian. One of them spoke: the nasal central English of the big cities, known in the second half of the twentieth century as Brummie Rap. No trace of any other accent; no hint of Eastern European which was what I had feared most.

These, I was relieved to notice, were English-born kids. Read with attention their faces, demeanour and body types anthologised episodes of empire, trade and conquest; a shading here, the shape of a nose there. In other words, they were mongrels and the fact that they had packed and were here, now, hunting the unwary (or, in my case, the engrossed and

inattentive) indicated that they had stepped out of or been ejected from their genetic or religious communities and thus had no resources to fall back on beyond what they scavenged.

A new fear engorged me. I studied their clothes and hands, seeking the shape of surgical implements. The only object of value I carry about my person is my wristwatch – an antique mechanical which, if it were a better marque, garnished with more valuable decoration and in better condition might be worth a small fortune. They could only want my iris or fingerprint. Apart from murder, biological theft is one of the few hand-to-hand crimes for which the trend line climbs steeply. Even physical rape has been overtaken by VR violation.

“ Faggot.” The girl leading them was perhaps four or five years older than the others. Socio-reports indicate that this is usually the case. She put her stiletto heeled boot on my chest and pressed. There was a sharp pain but I was relieved. They were playing an historical charade, a street punk pantomime based on sci-fi comics, novels, films and computer games of 50 years ago; leather clothes, chains, multicoloured tonings in their hair, tattoos. At least they had a sense of tradition and scholars’ eyes for detail. The most trivial hobby or obsession can lead to academic excellence and even violence may bestow its doctorates. The girl’s accusation was an historical reference to a time when homosexuality was the object of derision, sometimes flaring into violence.

I started to giggle - it must have been delayed shock - but stopped when the pain grew worse. My eyes filled with tears and when they cleared I saw that the rest of the group looked puzzled. Two of them were looking at their Wristcoms, tuning into satellites or picking up messages. They were about to shuffle off, their tiny attention spans exhausted, but despite its archaism and absurdity the girl’s description rankled - it misrepresented me and I am not one to let an error of fact pass without comment. It had been made before. I had...but anyway. I felt resentment.

“ Asexual,” I muttered.

“ What ?” The girl had ivory skin, deep chestnut hair that mimicked the pattern imprinted by incoming waves on the beach, eyes that reminded me of the statues of Pharaoh’s wives. Her body that of an undeveloped boy. She began to come into focus as a fact. I thought I recognised her.

“ Pardon....”

“ What did you say ?”

I couldn’t stop myself. “Asexual: lacking sex or sexuality; of reproduction not involving fusion of gametes. Gamete: mature germ-cell able to unite with another in sexual reproduction.”

She looked at me and laughed. I joined in and began to sit up. Shared knowledge can create understanding; subject matter displaces visceral dislike with more biddable intellectual disagreement. The pressure gave on my chest. Then the boot caught me on the chin and I felt other blows raining in on my chest, legs and rump. I’m thinner than I was: all bones, need feeding up, unprotected. The others were silent apart from the occasional gasp and giggle. The girl muttered some things I caught.

" It's you...remember me...Mr Mahfouz... adhd... disruptive... asocial.. difficult... pathological... idiot savant... dysfunctional... fucking useless."

I lay there for a while after they slouched off. I was relieved that, although wounded, my body was intact. Leila I thought; surname I couldn't remember though that was understandable given the circumstances. She had been cut off at the first annual Cull, a failure; a sad failure. Any flock member that crashes out hurts the dedicated tutor sharply. She had been gifted beyond her emotional intelligence. When had it been; seven years ago, five ? Time passes like river water as it sets off with increasing reluctance across the coastal plain. I sat up and there was a huge pain in my side, a combination pulse and impact which initially rendered me nauseous, then actually fountained the food in my stomach out of my mouth. How humiliating.

I managed the journey back with no further untoward incidents. My heart was pounding. I dialled into HealthNet, undressed, slipped into the scanner and the Net Doc put up his diagnosis: bruised ribs, a shadowy minor fracture. The medicaments arrived a few minutes later together with a certificate file if I cared to use it.

I've always afforded HealthNet whatever the other calls on my resources. To do without it has always seemed a false economy. I then sat down to the evenings work; gradings, reports, flock conference with other tutors.

This cohort is even less impressive than the previous years. My opinion is not golden age nostalgia. The other tutors agree and the most recent set of results skew the normal distribution even further down the scale. Given that the Final Cut is approaching fast there is cause to worry for the flock. While I don't indulge in peer criticism or gossip, some of the others - Dotrow, Burrell, Etheridge, Chan and MacCallum - seem more exercised about their performance-related bonus.

The Cull tests are hugely controversial as regards their year-on-year difficulty, their relevance and, of course, their confidentiality. There has been no proven case of cheating or tampering over the last four decades but the temptations are strong for the weak-minded or greedy and Dotrow impresses as a self-centred materialist, someone without the true sense of vocation. I have never met him in person but his image and communications are strongly accented by financial and self-esteem concerns.

Naj is, I think, the best of her cohort though some of the other tutors are unimpressed by her attitudinal data, Burrell is worried that the stretch will break her whereas MacCallum is prejudiced against her because 'he'd sooner fuck a camel than touch her.' Strange how some of them treat these conferences as the equivalent of a quiet, off-the-record conversation in a cosy and anonymous bar. MacCallum could be cast out if such Neanderthal attitudes ever became public.

" Are you all right ?"

This came from Craig. I've known him since we met on First Cohort Day; he was posted to Adelaide Node because he had been born in Darwin and had achieved nation-wide celebrity when he graduated. My public profile used to be higher than his but he's never held that against me. His eye-to-eye was down again - the commercial traffic is so heavy nowadays that at any one time 50% of our connections are bounced out - and the message came in on text.

" What do you mean ?"

" You're mis-spelling words and two sentences start with l/c."

" Isn't that how it's done ?"

I was being coy. He and I always write in sentences; all the other tutors use voice recognition translators which generate cummings text.

" ! "

" ? "

" All right. Yes I am somewhat exercised. "

" ? "

" Stop it."

" Don't come the crap with me Adam."

" Language ! "

" Exactly."

" Do you remember Leila ? "

" Lots of them. Which one ?"

" I cannot remember her surname."

" There's no need to go over the top. There's obviously something wrong with you. Date of the Battle of Lepanto ? Death of President William Clinton ? Publication of Our Mutual Friend ? How many fingers am I holding up ?"

"I used to write a lot about her. Her father was a musician, fifth generation Trinidadian. French mother. She was in the 99th percentile on numerical reasoning. Went up to postgraduate level on abstract - in fact we never reached the ceiling. Verbal ability towards the low end of the average band though; no checking skills, divergent, bi-polar, borderline hysteric. She dazzled in the first year but attendance was erratic, behaviour challenging, application index one of the lowest we've ever had. An almost exactly inverse correlation between duty and achievement. Then she simply ignored the first annual Cull. Didn't turn up for assessment centre; automatic dismissal of course."

" It's not so unusual. I've had others like that."

" There was something different about her."

" Mysticism."

" No, you know what I mean. You're a good tutor; you know the feeling."

" You're calming down. All CAPS in their place, better control of participles. Why are you interested ? You didn't have a crush; not you Adam."

I don't understand why he does that. He knows me. I waited then told him about Leila's part in the attack. I wrote it in Cummings to make my point. His reply sounded apologetic and sympathetic but that may have been wish fulfilment. I switched back to Plain Prose. He is, I suppose, my oldest friend.

MacCallum coughed. He watched the text screen then looked up at the camera.

" You shouldn't come in tomorrow," he said. He blinked down. I could see from the movement of his shoulders that he was using the pad.

" No, a good nights sleep."

" One of the juniors can do it."

" You know this is the worst time."

" They all are. How many days have you ever been sick ?" He knew the answer.

" You're owed it then, Mahfouz."

" That's not how it works." I've never thought that's how it works and even given my reservations about MacCallum I was surprised to hear someone in the upper echelons so completely contradict the fundamental ethics of the organisation.

" But Mahfouz, it would be more of a disaster if you were seriously incapacitated for any considerable length of time by a minor injury that could have been dealt with over two or three days r & r. You have two weeks. If you're not there in the final week run-up we WILL have a disaster. A junior can hold the fort; no-one but you can do the final preps. Their performance depends on you, lay aside the fact that we can't afford a living legend falling down on the job - literally or metaphorically. Right. I've messaged Yvette and she's confirmed. Stay at home tomorrow."

He is right of course, though everything I believe argues against him.

After the sign-off I had more units to set up, time zones to cross, an audit of the day's learning channels and path maps for the next day to survey and confirm. I dialled up Yvette and spent an hour updating her. This should have been unnecessary: juniors are required to audit learning trails for all their delegated groups each and every evening so that they're ready to substitute at the shortest possible notice. Needless to say she hadn't; in addition she seemed somewhat impatient, as though she had another and more pressing appointment. There again,

she is fundamentally French though I believe her grandfather was Algerian. I thought to dial in anyway but, as you can see, I didn't. I'm here looking at the standard wall-saver they supply in sub-flats. I haven't bothered to change it since I moved to Wapping and I've only just noticed that the flow of light, the movement of clouds, the activities of the inhabitants are primitive and artificial. And I've been writing this.

Many people collect pens and stationery; fine Yard o' Led pencils, top range Parker pens and Papyrus hand-made commonplace books (providing they're completely blank) are valuable and show excellent returns on initial investment. I buy such choice objects rarely, after a period of saving. When I do purchase I take my time, examine the goods in detail on several occasions. I am never influenced by catalogue copy and have rarely, very rarely, come away with an item which was worth less than I paid for it, which did not surpass the minimum quality standards I have laid down. My collection is thus small, mid-range but, of its type, choice. No, there is nothing strange in collecting such material; indeed it is a tradition among senior Cull tutors. My eccentricity is in doing what I am doing now; filling an Edding with Pelikan washable blue, opening up a marbled hardback journal (with ribbon place marker) watermarked with the image of Queen Victoria and treating them as tools rather than adornments, investments or gifts.

I practised for an hour or so on some less valuable sheets of paper. It was necessary. Unused for so long, my handwriting had become disgraceful but its neatness, accuracy and, yes, elegance, is something on which I have always prided myself and before long I was able to reproduce elegantly tapering tails on the f's and graceful descenders on major block caps without too much conscious effort. The skill is to internalise. Lack of practice leads to loss of confidence and the intrusion of the conscious mind. It's my first lesson to each cohort; conscious effort must be worked through to attain unconscious grace.

I couldn't sleep. I lay awake mulling over the day; Naj's similarities to my young self; my genealogical (genealogy: descent traced continuously from ancestor; pedigree; animal's or plant's line of descent from earlier forms; relating to the gene which is the unit of heredity contained in a chromosome, controlling the particular inherited characteristic of an individual) musings while I was walking down the street; my encounter with Leila and her, no doubt she so calls it, tribe; the comments made by my peers during the conference. My pain was controlled but throbbed away as an undercurrent to the reminiscences.

I thought how stupid I had been. I possess a pay ticket for the route between my house and The Wharf because, whatever the weather, I prefer to walk rather than dare the vagaries of the Standard Transport System, even if I wanted to afford the cost of such an intolerably inefficient, dangerous and unclean mode of travel. I have grown used to walking without paying attention to my surroundings and it was in that mood that I had missed my turn-off, wandered on, finally blundered into the free zone and been made conscious of my surroundings by the blow to my head and the boot in my back. It was this final episode that haunted me because it brought to mind the many years I had walked between home and the St George In The East Cull Centre, hypersensitive (it seems to me that's obvious since you can hardly look out of the corner of your eye without seeing the prefix on a building, a poster, a screen or written in the sky, while 'sensitive' is common ground to soft-bodied beings) to the fact that I was marked as flock by the badge and shirt I wore and the filing case I carried; that I was walking on unregulated territory; and that every turning, every complete or ruined building, every dip and scrub might harbour jealousy, resentment and violence. As a child I was adept at spotting the slightest

possibility of trouble, at avoiding it, at predicting before I could perceive them those situations which might deflect me from my ultimate aim: to get to the centre each day, to apply myself to work, to survive each cut off, to achieve membership of the final Cull, never to have to walk in such places again and, most importantly, to better my family's conditions. As a child and adolescent I burned to alleviate my mother's workload; to erase my father's influence and to take Eve away from the companions and experiences which increasingly trivialised her good and tender heart.

These vivid, almost pictorial reminiscences took me, in my head, to the day I came home to find Nathan ensconced. I was 16, 8 years into the programme. ...