

WALKING THE WALLS

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First day back of the school year and I notice the kid straight away, lining up outside the hall for the new intake assembly. You can't miss him with that bright ginger hair and the skin that goes with it, splattered with freckles. He stands out amongst the colony of indistinguishable grey seals shuffling in a line up the corridor, with his red tufted hair and the splotchy brown blotches on his face, like a pup that hasn't quite lost his baby camouflage.

Only it doesn't conceal him, that's the trouble. Even in the regulation gun-metal-coloured uniform, his brand-new blazer reaching practically to his knees, he's already a marked man. And he knows it. It's not just his hair that grabs my attention: it's his quiet watchfulness, head down but eyes darting quickly from side to side like he knows he's got to be permanently on guard in case of attack.

I understand what that feels like.

A thud and my knee suddenly gives way beneath me. I stumble forward into a screech of Year 9 girls, my bag falling from my shoulder. They turn to glare at me, then their faces break into smiles.

'Hiya, Felix! How you doing?'

Girls like me. Boys don't. Not the kind of sad, fascist,

homophobic losers who go round in gangs and are afraid to have a single original thought in their heads, anyway. Like the ugly, slime-producing gastropod sneering at me when I turn around to see who gave me a dead leg this time. It's Slug. Simon Lugg, from my class. I've got complacent in the school holidays. I'd forgotten about him and his mean little ways.

'Sorry, Felix. Didn't mean to kick you. Thought you were the cat!'

Old joke but it makes his sidekicks crease up.

'Get lost, Molluscs!' I say, which makes them laugh even more as they disappear down the corridor. They always laugh if they don't understand something, so basically they bust a gut all through the school day, tittering at teachers, jeering through geography, mocking maths, sending up science, falling about in French, arseing their way through art. I find *that* particularly annoying because art is my favourite subject.

Beside me the new Year 7s shift uneasily in the queue. I don't blame them. They've probably heard all the stories I heard about the Sec before I started here: how they stick the new boys' heads down the toilets; how they take their trousers off and hide them; how they force them to eat disgusting stuff and lick the bottoms of their shoes.

None of this is true by the way. If it was, it would've happened to me.

That doesn't mean no bullying goes on. It does. But not that much of it is physical, to be fair. Only thickos like Slug and his slimy trail of followers resort to that

occasionally. Most of the time people use psychology: ostracization and verbal intimidation being the favourites. Even that's not very subtle. Just offensive. I've been called it all in my time.

Pretty boy! Weirdo! Freak! Geek! Nerd!

And much worse. Believe me.

'Never mind, Fee! Sticks and stones may break your bones but names can never hurt you.'

That's what Gabby drilled into me before I started the Sec. It works on the whole.

'It's only words. Tell me and Angie if anyone picks on you and we'll sort them out.'

My older sister Gabby is fearless. She had her own problems to deal with when she started school, from this gang of girls known as the Gemstones. They leant on her in a girly way, coming in between her and her best friend Angie, spreading rumours around that she'd been with Angie's boyfriend, that she was pregnant by him! It was all lies. They even tried to make her shoplift for them. Personally, I think that's worse than getting a dead leg once in a while. But the difference was, Gabby had a best mate to stick up for her.

I wish I had a best mate.

'You'll make friends when you get to secondary school, Fee, like I did,' said Gabby.

I did make friends. Eventually. Just not close friends. It's like some boys were afraid of being seen to be too close to me in case they got tagged 'pretty boy' or 'geek' too.

Angie says my problem is I'm just too good-looking for

my own good. Plus I'm bright. Not the best combination to survive the Sec.

Anyway, at least I had my sister and her mate to look out for me.

Gabby and Angie took their GCSEs this summer. They both did really well. Now they've stayed on in the Sixth Form to do A levels so they can get in to uni.

The Gemstones didn't do well in their exams. They've all left school.

Slug and his snails won't be around for ever. Sticks and stones. Slugs and snails. I can cope with them all nowadays.

I pick my bag up off the floor and stick it back on my shoulder. As I do, the ginger kid's eyes dart to mine. I give him a wink. A ghost of a smile hovers for a second on his lips before he looks away.

Poor kid. I'd hate to be starting again in Year 7.



One good thing about being in Year 9 at our school is that they give you a bit of choice so you can select the subjects you like and drop the ones you hate. Well, not all of them. You have to do some subjects, like English, maths and science, whether you like them or not, because they're part of the National Curriculum. I'm not sure who decides this. If I was in charge I would definitely make music, art and English compulsory and maths, science and games optional. Or better still, I'd ban them altogether.

I think the same sadist who drew up the National Curriculum also thought up the standard method for choosing teams used by every school in the country. It goes something like this. The sports teacher, usually a screwball himself, picks the two biggest and most competitive psychos in the year as opposing captains then sits back smugly while they select their teams one by one. This ensures without fail that the nutters are dispersed and that I will be left at the end as the one person nobody wants on their team. By default this makes me feel the least popular person in the year. Apparently, according to my father who is uncommonly in touch with his feelings nowadays having being made redundant from

his high-powered city job during the recession, you never get over this.

I think he's feeling a bit rejected himself at the moment, which has probably brought it all back.

Another thing about being in Year 9 is that they set you in ability groups instead of teaching you all together in one massive melting pot. Some people, including my father, himself a product of the private school system, think this should work, because you get like-minded people working together. Or to put it more bluntly, you get all the geeks together in the top group (Talented and Gifted . . . TAGS . . . we do like our labels, don't we?), the ordinary kids in the middle groups, and all the thickos and headbangers hidden away in the bottom group to be taken out on a quickly arranged day trip when the Ofsted inspectors come.

Doesn't work though. Because my favourite subject is art. And art is timetabled against a second language, which I wouldn't mind taking if I could, but then I couldn't draw and if I can't draw, I might as well not breathe. So, against Dad's wishes, I signed up for art last July which now means I'm sitting in the art room with 29 of Year 9's most brain-dead morons at one end of the spectrum and certifiable psychopaths at the other.

And they think *I'm* the fruitcake.

'This term we're going to have fun,' announces Jacko doubtfully, eyeing his new art class, nearly all boys. Mr Jackson is a good guy and creditable artist, but somewhat lacking in classroom control. My heart sinks. I hate that

word fun. It always means chaos. 'It's all about identity. We're going to find out about ourselves and get to know each other.' My heart sinks even further.

'We know each other already, sir,' says Graham Slick. 'Jed's a nutter, Gav's a nob-head and Felix is a fairy!'

Slug bellows like a cow giving birth and everyone else but me titters obediently, even Jed Saunders who looks quite flattered to be called a nutter and Gavin Pritchard who wouldn't object to anything Graham Slick decides to call him, just so long as he leaves him well alone.

Jacko glances around nervously and says, 'Listen up now all of you, listen up.' Where do teachers get these phrases from? Do they go home and say to their wives, 'Listen up!' Or when their front doorbell rings do they roar, 'Sit down! That bell is a signal for me and not for you!' And if they're standing in the queue at Tesco, do they fold their arms and tap their foot and say smugly to all and sundry, 'It doesn't matter to me! It's not my time you're wasting!'

Anyway, I digress. (Another favourite of teachers!) 'We're going to do collage,' Jacko announces and, predictably, a universal groan echoes round the room. Actually, I'm with them on this one, though I know they would've groaned whatever he'd said. Unless of course, he'd announced, 'We're going to do life-drawing today and a page three model is going to pose for us.'

I wish we were doing life-drawing.

'We're all going to make a collage of ourselves,' Jacko battles on manfully, even though actually this is a lie. Teachers always say 'We' even though they never do

anything themselves other than yell at us to get on with it. 'I want you to brainstorm your favourite things.' He doles out big pieces of lining paper and a felt-tip to each person in the room. Wise move, Jacko, stalling the normal 'Can't, sir, haven't got a pen' objections. 'Now then, write down the things that are important to you.'

'Sex!' leers Slug, writing it in big block capitals across his page. He even manages to spell it properly. I'm impressed.

'Put down your favourite book,' Jacko continues, striving to ignore him. Twenty-nine faces stare at him incredulously. 'Or your favourite fruit,' he adds quickly.

'Don't like fruit,' says Jed morosely.

'You're supposed to have it five times a day,' says Jacko, trying to jolly him along.

'What? Sex?' yells Slug and everyone falls about laughing.

'In your dreams,' I say under my breath and start doodling clouds on my paper. Slug gives me a suspicious look.

'Think of your favourite animal . . .'

'Baa . . .' bleats Slick then says, 'Oh sorry, that's Felix's.'

'Sheep-shagger!' chortles Slug who's caught his drift. The class roars appreciatively. There's no logic to this. How can I be a fairy *and* a sheep-shagger? I add legs to a cloud and turn it into a sheep then do the same to the others.

'Now think of your favourite activity.' Jacko moves on hurriedly.

There's a tirade of obscenities as most of the boys in the class compete to describe their preferred methods of

entertainment. I never would've thought they could be so imaginative. 'Don't discuss them. Write them down!' instructs Jacko, a bit unnerved. I sketch a boy lying in a hammock slung between two trees. He's got earphones on and he's listening to music and drawing.

The class settles down and starts writing. 'Best film! Best music! Best TV programme!' Jacko's on a roll, now he's finally got everyone's attention. I draw a saxophone.

'Who's your hero? The person you look up to most?' A noisy discussion breaks out about sporting, music and movie celebs and random people who've shot to fame through YouTube. I make an outline drawing of Charlie Chaplin, unmistakable in his trademark bowler hat, walking stick, baggy trousers and toothbrush moustache, looking a bit lost.

Brave little guy. I've seen all his films. Him against the world.