

A Haze of Time and Place

By David Jowsey

Back to the playground wall he stands motionless, watching the final minutes unfold as they always do – a kaleidoscope of colour pierced with a cacophony of sound amid the last gasps of morning freedom.

Bodies thunder over the hard ground this way and that, a ball at their feet and the wind of their passage whispering across his face like a ghostly memory. Shouts of joy and anguish pierce the still air of the morning in equal measures, while solitary figures stand silently by, huddled, watching and waiting, listening for the unwelcome bell that will cut the air like a call to order; a command to draw the hounds to silence and the masters to their charge.

Pressed against his shoulders, the brickwork, red and crumbling, distressed by years of bitter winters, hot summer days and the relentless hammer of leather, feels rough and worn beneath his fingers. And yet it is so familiar, as if it had always been a part of his life.

I suppose it has, he thought, and for a brief instant his mind slides into a comfortable haze of time and place where faces change and mould themselves into the timeless memories of his youth. He smiles.

Movement in his minds-eye catches his attention and he looks up. An imposing figure stands in the doorway, his suit dark, his shirt crisp and white, his shoes polished to an immaculate shine. Pristine in every way, he demanded respect and was offered it without question as he steps

onto the playground. Doors to his left and right call out to the genders of the past: boys one way, girls another in lines straight and silent.

Standing in line he had dared not move, fearing the anger of his master like the jaws of a lion, but later, when the master sat by his side amid the rich smell of soap and tobacco, he had smiled and was gentle. His large hands had rested delicately on the smooth wooden surface of the desk as his long fingers shaped and controlled the world of the page. And through the master's teaching and patience, the young boy he had once been had understood.

Yet it had not always been that way. Strict and demanding, she had stood with her hair pinned back from her face, hard and cold, with no room for misbehaviour, never suffering fools gladly. Yet she had been soft in those few, snatched moments of care when her mother-like nature had shown through, and she had taken the child by the hand, helping, caring, almost loving.

A shout pulled him from his reverie and he looked up, startled to see such colour again. Bags piled in corners reach upwards in mountainous ranges, forgotten and neglected, while their owners chase and tag and kick and cheer, squeezing every last second from their time before they are relieved of it.

The clock ticks off its last seconds and the slamming of doors and hurrying feet invades the playground. Gathered around the gate, mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters stand in muted conversation, waiting to be released into their own secret worlds, of which their children know nothing.

A ringing sound slices the air. Silence descends while idle feet shuffle and scrape, bodies fidgeting with the energy of youth, their half finished conversations whispered, drawing to a

premature close, and Sir straightens his tie and dusts off his jacket. He pulls himself up to his full height and stands for a moment thinking, remembering.

He steps forwards and smiles.

How things have changed.

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