



MEG ROSOFF

What I Was

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Sunday Times

FROM THE BESTSELLING, AWARD-WINNING
AUTHOR OF *HOW I LIVE NOW*

What I Was
by
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I am a century old, an impossible age, and my brain has no anchor in the present. Instead it drifts, nearly always to the same shore.

Today, as most days, it is 1962. The year I discovered love.

I am sixteen years old.

Rule number one: Trust no one.

By the time we reached St Oswald's, fog had completely smothered the coast. Even this far inland, the mist was impenetrable; our white headlights merely illuminated the fact that we couldn't see. Hunched over the wheel, Father edged the car forward a few feet at a time. We might have driven off England and into the sea if not for a boy waving a torch in bored zigzags by the school entrance.

Father came to a halt in front of the main hall, set the brake, pulled my bag out of the boot, and turned to me in what he probably imagined was a soldierly manner.

'Well,' he said, 'this is it.'

This is what? I stared at the gloomy Victorian building and imagined those same words used by fathers sending their sons off into hopeless battle, up treacherous mountains, across the Russian steppes. They seemed particularly inappropriate here. All I could see was a depressed institution of secondary education suitably shrouded in fog. But I said nothing, having learnt a thing or two in sixteen years of carefully judged mediocrity, including the value of silence.

It was my father's idea that I attend St Oswald's, whose long history and low standards fitted his requirements exactly. He must have rejoiced that such a school existed – one that would accept his miserable failure of a son and attempt to transform him (me) into a useful member of society, a lawyer, say, or someone who worked in the City.

'It's time you sorted yourself out,' he said. 'You're nearly a man.' But a less true description could scarcely have been uttered. I was barely managing to get by as a boy.

My father shook hands with our welcoming committee as if he, not I, were matriculating, and a few moments of chat with head and housemaster ensued. Wasn't the weather . . . hadn't standards . . . next thing we know . . . one can only . . .

I stood by, half-listening, knowing the script by heart.

When we returned to the car, my father cleared his throat, gazed off into the middle distance, and suggested I take this opportunity to make amends for my last two educational disasters. And then, with a pessimistic handshake and a brief clasp of my shoulder, he was off.

A bored prefect led me away from the main school towards a collection of rectangular brick buildings arranged around a bleak little courtyard. In the misty darkness, my future home uncannily resembled a prison. As we entered Mogg House (Gordon Clifton-Mogg, housemaster), the weight of the nineteenth century settled around my shoulders like a shroud. Tall brick walls and narrow arched windows seemed designed to admit as little light and air as possible. The architect's philosophy was obvious: starve

the human spirit, yes, but subtly, employing economies of dimension and scale. I could tell from here that the rooms would be dark all year round, freezing in winter, cramped and airless in summer. As I later discovered, St Oswald's specialized in architectural sadism – even the new science lab (pride of the establishment) featured brown glass and breeze-block walls dating from 1958, height of the ugly unfriendly architecture movement.

Up three flights of stairs and down a long featureless corridor we trudged. At the end, the older boy dumped my bag, pounded on the door and left without waiting for an answer. After a minute I was granted entry to a cramped dormitory room where three boys looked me over impassively, as if checking out a long shot in the paddock at Cheltenham.

There was a moment of silence.

'I'm Barrett,' said the blunt-featured one at last, producing a small black book from his pocket and pointing to the others in turn. 'Gibbon. And Reese.'

Reese giggled. Barrett made some notes in his little book, then turned to Gibbon. 'I give him two terms,' he said. 'You?'

Gibbon, tallest of the three, peered at me closely. For a moment I thought he might ask to see my teeth. He pulled two crisp pound notes out of an expensive calfskin wallet. 'Three terms,' he said.

I emptied all expression from my face, met and held his gecko eyes.

'Maybe four.'

'Choose,' said Barrett impatiently, pencil poised. He

squinted out from under a school cap pulled low over his face, like a bookmaker's visor.

'Three then.'

Barrett made a note in his book.

'I say four.' Reese dug into a pocket and pulled out a handful of coins, mainly pennies. He was the least impressive of the three, and seemed embarrassed by the ritual.

Barrett accepted the coins and looked up at me. 'You in?'

Was I *in* on a bet predicting the demise of my own academic career? Well, it certainly offered a variation on the usual welcome. I pushed past them, unpacked my bag into a metal trunk, made up my narrow bed with regulation starched sheets, burrowed down under the covers and went to sleep.

Rule number two: Keep something back.

I will tell you that I'm not one of those heroes who attracts admiration for his physical attributes. Picture a boy, small for his age, ears stuck at right angles to his head, hair the texture of straw and the colour of mouse. Mouth: tight. Eyes: wary, alert.

You might say that superficial flaws were not uncommon in boys my age, but in my experience this was untrue. Stretching left, right, up, down and diagonally in every St Oswald's class picture were boys of a more usual type – boys with strong jaws, straight noses and thick hair of definite colour; boys with long, straight limbs and bold, confident expressions; boys with skills, inborn talents, a genetically determined genius for politics or Latin or the law.

In such pictures, my face (blurry and unformed) always looked shifty and somewhat imbecilic, as if the flesh itself realized that the impression I was making was a bad one, even as the shutter clicked.

Did I mention that St Oswald's was my third school? The first two asked me (not entirely politely) to leave, due to the deplorable nature of my behaviour and grades. In

my defence, I'd like to point out that my behaviour was not deplorable if by deplorable you mean rude, belligerent, violent and antisocial – setting fire to the library, stabbing or raping a teacher. By deplorable they meant 'less than dedicated to study', 'less than competent at writing essays', 'less than interesting to the head and board of governors'. Given my gentle failings, their assessment strikes me now as unnecessarily cruel, and makes me wonder how they labelled the student who opened fire with an AK-47 in the middle of chapel.

In fact, my lack of distinction was mainly restricted to photographs and schoolwork. When it came to opinions, I was (I am) like the sword of Zorro: swift, incisive, deadly. My opinions on the role of secondary education, for instance, are absolute. In my opinion, this school and its contemporaries were nothing more than cheap merchants of social status, selling an inflated sense of self-worth to middle-class boys of no particular merit.

I will, however, grant them something. Without the first school, I would not have ended up at the second. Without the second, I would not have attended St Oswald's. Without St Oswald's, I would not have met Finn.

Without Finn, there would be no story.