



Head Start

JUDITH CUTLER

Allison & Busby Limited
12 Fitzroy Mews
London W1T 6DW
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2016.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2070-5

Typeset in 11/16 pt Sabon by
Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication
has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced
from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

CHAPTER ONE

We might have been reprising my interview, with the solemn faces topping sober clothes. The governors sat in a rough semicircle facing me across several classroom tables pushed together to make one formidable barricade. Richard Morris flicked a friendly wink in my direction but within a nanosecond his expression was as hostile as most of the others'. Only the vicar, a grey man in his late fifties or early sixties called Mark Stephens, seemed disinterested – and, as the meeting progressed, actually uninterested.

As chair, Brian Dawes began the interrogation. He leant heavily forward, supporting his massive neck and shoulders on thick arms. A bull, ready to charge. But his question was neutral enough. 'How have you found your first week, Miss Cowan?

How indeed?

I am monarch of all I survey.

But I am not a castaway, alone on a desert island – though like Alexander Selkirk I chose to be alone. I haven't got trees

and bays to worry about, but I do want to look into every nook and cranny, so that I can place everything on my mental map. And I can do it in private, at the end of my very first day. Staff and pupils have gone home. The cleaner doesn't arrive till six-thirty tomorrow. The place is mine.

When I first went to school, thirty-odd years ago, the very sight of the head teacher had me scrabbling for the most obscure corner. I didn't want even her shadow to touch me. Then she and her iron grey hair and sensible shoes disappeared – I don't think I'd grasped the concept of retirement – to be replaced by a man who was probably in his forties. Was his name Phillotson? Although he smiled a great deal, soon vague advice to avoid him seeped round the school. No one would, perhaps could, explain why to a naïve little coward like me. Funnily enough it was the feistiest boys and girls who seemed to be most wary of him. None of them wanted to run his errands, and none wished to be sent to him for some petty classroom crime. I still didn't know, never having been anything other than a well-behaved nonentity, why one week the knots of mothers who always gathered at the playground gate huddled more closely than usual, shutting their mouths tightly when their children appeared, grabbing them and dragging them away.

Mr Phillotson didn't come in one day. Or the next. But for days, perhaps for weeks, women with stern but kind faces would sit in his office and ask teachers to let one child at a time to come and talk to them. They were told not to tell the rest of us what had been happening. But we soon knew that Mr Phillotson had interfered with several girls and two or three boys – though I had no idea what

‘interfered’ meant. Thereafter we had two more women head teachers, one of whom made everything from spelling bees to changing for PE competitive, while another banned races in case someone came last.

By senior school, I was getting a bit savvier. I knew which teachers you could enjoyably cheek unpunished, and which you had to respect. By the time I went to university I realised it was those you respected who got the best results.

So here I was, on my first day in my own school, a head teacher myself. I wasn’t as young as some of the new breed of superheads, but I was still a couple of years short of forty, with a variety of non-teaching jobs behind me, as well as plenty of classroom experience. I refused to feel daunted, though the head had retired at the end of the summer term and not been replaced immediately. The deputy head was on long-term sick leave, apparently because of stress: was this surprising, if she’d been expected to cover the head’s admin role as well as her own? There was so much to get to grips with I was glad that the supply teacher who’d covered my predecessor’s classes all last term would be continuing till the end of the week in order to teach mine. Time enough to worry about marking and preparation when I’d covered all the other bases, of which there were many, since the school and its hundred and twenty pupils had been without a leader for so long.

The school?

My school.

A typically fierce grey stone Victorian building, it originally had separate entrances for boys and girls, though both were now blocked and a unisex one opened up. The

windows were so high that no child could possibly see out of them and the even higher ceilings sucked up any warmth. It had had a sixties extension tacked on, not entirely sympathetically. Actually, not at all sympathetically. But it held the vital assembly hall, which doubled as a gym, and also the kitchen, itself recently extended and refurbished to provide the children with a cooked lunchtime meal, a pair of his and hers with just one cubicle in each, and some stockrooms. The car park was the far side. The old and new parts were connected by a glassed-in corridor, the roof of which was leaking after a day of heavy rain. Judging by the stains on the floor, this was nothing new.

At least it was in a pretty setting, on the edge of the picture postcard village of Wrayford, not far from Canterbury. Many state schools struggle for even playground space; here the pupils enjoyed not just a playground but a playing field big enough to hold a football or cricket pitch with a running track round the perimeter. Currently it had neither, but in time I would make sure it had both. There was certainly equipment for any number of sports, stowed carelessly in as big a stockroom as I've ever seen – but see into it was all I could do. One false move would bring down on my head a cascade of boxes and bags and posts and nets and goodness knows what else. The stockroom next to it was equally chaotic; it seemed to be dedicated to old chairs, scenery of long-gone plays, and two or three rails of what looked like rags. And yet more boxes. In the old days a head teacher would have been able to summon a live-in caretaker to deal with it all. Now I was glad to be offered the former caretaker's house just across the playground at a rent I could manage – there were no affordable houses for

sale in this village or any of its neighbours. It was hardly a bargain: built in the fifties, it had metal window frames and a sad air of having been built on the cheap.

The mess was something I'd deal with another day. I still had boxes of my own to deal with, in the house across the playground. Home. It didn't feel like it yet, of course, since I'd only arrived in Wrayford on Friday afternoon.

Yes, it was time to switch off the hall lights, locking up behind me, and to head back to my office for my coat.

What should I have for supper? No takeaways this far into the sticks, of course. There was a pub at the far end of the village, which I had yet to try; for what seemed like for ever, I'd felt uneasy eating alone in public. Vulnerable. The plus side, I suppose, that now I could make a meal out of whatever I happened to have to hand – a sort of personal MasterChef, I guess.

So my mind was drifting along the lines of pasta, bacon, courgettes and capers – in other words, I wasn't doing what I constantly told my pupils and even colleagues they should always do. I wasn't concentrating, as turning the catch behind me, I moved into the glass corridor.

I wasn't alone.

I had been. I had locked and double-checked every outer door, and even connecting doors, as I moved along. I know I had. How long was it since I had not taken such an obvious precaution?

I was concentrating now. With every fibre.

The January dusk had deepened into darkness. My bravado in taking this tour had backfired, to say the least. As I froze, the merciless overhead strip lights exposed me like an actor centre stage through all those big windows

to anyone outside. I couldn't see my audience of one. All I could see was palely distorted versions of my own face. Earlier in the day it had worn a confident smile, to match the sharp new hairdo and even sharper new suit – though perhaps in such a backwater the shoes I'd chosen had been a tottery mistake.

Now instead of effortlessly taking charge, I needed to defend myself! A weapon? Where in a modern school would you find anything that if dropped, shaken or even flourished might constitute a danger to a child, let alone a marauding adult? Should I hurl tiny indoor shoes at an assailant? Brandish a forgotten Fireman Sam lunchbox?

Tickled by the absurdity, I was ready to laugh away my terror when I heard a clatter, then a slam. So my intuition was right. When hadn't it been?

The noises had come from the extension. To investigate I must go back through the hall, and into the utility corridor with the stockrooms. Or I could leave the building now.

The question was answered for me. There was another slam – from the hall this time. A window I had latched myself swung back and forth. I peered out. Someone in jeans and overlarge hoodie hurtled towards the playing field. Male? Female? Within seconds the figure had been absorbed by the darkness. Gone.

Despite the pounding in my ears, the sweat-slippery palms, I checked the rest of the building. Nothing. Except that the stockrooms, which I had left locked, were now unlocked. As far as I could tell nothing had been disturbed, let alone taken – not so much as an underinflated football.

An old-fashioned caretaker could have changed the locks in minutes. But education cuts meant the species was

pretty well extinct. A locksmith? On my budget? At least I could take care of it myself – goodness knows I'd had enough practice fitting new locks over recent years.

What I'd not had practice in was wandering round unlit villages. I was a city woman, never realising that street lights were a luxury I'd have to manage without. It was fine for stargazers, this lack of what I'm sure they'd call light pollution; for someone who shuddered at every movement in the shadows, it was a trial. I'd thought of going to the pub, had I? No, there'd be no evening walks for me till I'd got hold of a hefty torch, a hand-held alarm and anything legal by way of a deterrent spray. Even crossing the fifty yards of playground tarmac was enough to have me gasping for breath, clutching my bag and laptop to my chest as if they were a shield. I might have had the foresight to stick my key in my pocket to save the endless search in the depths of my bag, but my hand was shaking too hard for me to slot it in first time. This was like the bad old days, the ones I thought I'd put behind me for ever.

And this house didn't have a panic room.

The ugly curtains I'd not had time to replace firmly drawn across locked windows, I sat down at the kitchen table to review my situation. Come now, I'd done enough breathing and relaxation exercises to be able to deal with this. *Breathe out. Remember that every time you breathe out you relax . . .*

I might repeat the soothing mantra myself, but it took longer to work than the persuasive professional voice at the top of my playlist.

Still wearing my coat, I reached for my iPhone. But instead

of conjuring up a recording, my fingers found their way, all by themselves, it seemed, to the phone pad screen. All through the Simon business, the protracted, unnecessary Simon business, when I'd been a battered spouse trying to elude his increasingly brazen attempts to beat every injunction going and to kill me, Pat Webb had been my tower of strength. Originally my police liaison officer, Pat had become a friend, though very much within professional limits. A half-friend, to be honest, since I knew a great deal about much of his professional side, and very little of his personal life, while he knew more than most about my marital problems, and no more than he needed to about the jobs I'd taken in a vain attempt to shake off Simon.

Would he mind a call now? Would he even sound pleased to hear me? Even when things were darkest, he almost managed to persuade me that working to protect me was an honour and a privilege.

He answered first ring. 'Hi, there, Avo!'

That's right, Avo. Not Ava. Short for Avocado. Many people wouldn't want that as a nickname: I liked it. My leathery carapace stopped people seeing the soft, bruised flesh inside. And at the heart was a stone that would refuse to break down in a compost heap but sprout nicely if encouraged. Yes, I was proud to be an avocado.

'How's things in Worzel Gummidge Land?' he demanded.

I could always be honest with Pat. 'They'd be better with a panic room.'

'I'm sure they would. But the guy's locked up, Jane, for the best part of the rest of his life. Key's lost, if not thrown away. Isn't it?' His Wolverhampton vowels were wonderfully unexcited.

‘I know. My head knows. But the bit of my body that squirts adrenalin by the bucket-load doesn’t. Not when I’m locked in an empty building with an intruder.’ I told him my tale of woe. ‘And there are no street lights in the village,’ I added, probably sounding like Eeyore.

‘And no rural police within twenty miles, I daresay. Well, school security is the local council’s responsibility, so long as it’s the children’s safety you’re worried about.’

‘Not any more. Everything comes out of our budget.’

‘In that case, you need to fund a few intruder lights at the very least. As for your house, can you get your landlord to improve your home security?’

‘It’s run by some agency. Even if the owner eventually agrees it’ll take for ever.’ My voice rose in a lamentable wail.

His came flat and sensible. ‘I’m sure you could “lose” your keys and have to fit new locks. If you had internal shutters fitted, you’d have to take them down at the end of the tenancy and make good any damage, but I can’t imagine anyone arguing if they knew your recent history.’

‘They know very little. Not even the governors know everything.’

‘You’ve got used to the new name?’

‘And the new nose and hair. I’ve changed everything about my appearance, even wearing some stupid killer heels to alter the way I walk. Simon’s in the nick, but I bet he’s got friends who aren’t.’

‘Hmm. I suppose by the nature of things solicitors know all sorts of low lifes.’

‘It’s a shame I’m so ambitious.’

‘Why? What’s ambition got to do with the price of coal?’ he demanded.

‘It’s easier to be anonymous in a backstage job. Ordinary classroom teacher. But no, I have to stick my head above the parapet.’

‘It’s not exactly Eton you’re running,’ he pointed out dryly.

‘It’d be a first for womankind if I was. Enough about me.’ It was, without a doubt. ‘How’s your marathon training going? Have the blisters healed yet?’

As if fired by Pat’s can-do approach to running, his brand-new hobby, I set out with newly straightened shoulders for the nearest late-opening big DIY store, just off Canterbury’s tortuous ring road: it was better to buy locks now than to sit around belly-aching, to use Pat’s phrase, about the bad ones. Good ones for the stockrooms – check. And very good ones for the house – check. And fish and chips – not very good – from an edge-of-town chippie. As for my boxes, they’d have to wait till another night – there weren’t all that many, of course, because most of my personal stuff, anything to identify me with my past, was safely in store in a city two hundred unlikely miles away.

My carpentry tools, though somewhere in my house, were at the bottom of one of them. So waiting till another night was no longer an option.