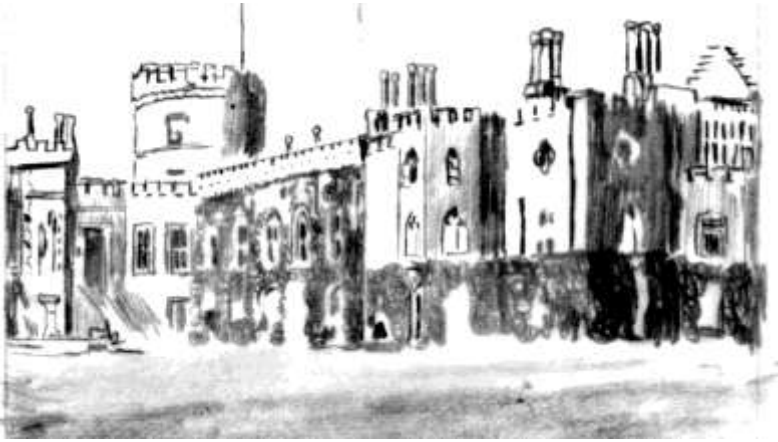


Sample Chapter Only

CLOSER TO AUSTRALIA



This is Finchley on a pleasant spring evening. You can hear the celestial voices of a boy’s choir and a very good one too: accompanying the frogs and crickets with Blake’s *Jerusalem*. Finchley is one of those English boarding schools with gothic ivy-covered buildings, stained glass windows, spreading oaks, and those legendary lawns that have been rolled for three hundred years. Not a long way out of London, down in the middle of Kent. You know the sort of place I mean. Let’s get off the grass before the dew soaks through to our socks.

Enter the chapel where the boys stand in the choir stalls, subdued by their white cassocks, restrained by sheening pine and dun stone, all under slightly inadequate incandescent lighting. It smells like every church in the world, and every movement resounds incriminatingly—inducing that self-consciousness that always accompanies us into these places, no matter what our religious beliefs.

Let’s move closer. Apart from the choir, the chapel is empty, for this is only a practice session; late, after classes, on what is

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probably a Tuesday evening. Bit of a waste of time really—they sing superbly, and the practice can only be a fine honing of their skills.

It's all happening under the critical ear of 'Weasel-face', the effeminate Mr Marchant whose tweaked fingers tremble and dart before his pursed lips and jutting chin as he seems to physically manipulate every boy's voice and rush them about the scales in trills and tremolos. The boys are aged from eight to fifteen, angelic little fellows, and everyone one of them wish that old fag Marchant would accidentally flush himself down the bog with all the other. They swoop toward the crescendo now.

Suddenly, in the midst of it all, a very distinct flat note can be discerned. The singing is so excellent that the one voice with the dud note hits like a thunderclap. Only the slightest flicker of a frown passes on Mr Marchant's already puckered face. The boys struggle on a few notes, but then, that errant voice emits a most dreadful squawk. Some of the other boys falter, look, giggle. Oh

yes, that's Lee Parsons all right—he always has been one for standing out from the crowd.

Poor Lee. Just when he was thinking 'if only it could always be like this', that he was blurring in, just a segment of the blob, one ant in the colony, instead of being a vilified freak; now that freakiness has struck again, a savage blow and, quite literally, below the belt. For just as he strives for the one octave leap ahead of the crescendo, his metabolism makes a leap of its own, his balls choosing that moment to drop and bring his voice crashing down with them in one dreadful, undignified screech.

At first even Lee is not completely sure of the source of that ungodly sound has been emitted—surely not from himself. Around him, other boys are struggling on, while again that flicker of a frown passes over Mr Marchant's face before he too presses forward, and Lee tries to recover the note, but instead that wrenching crow call comes again and this time Lee knows his own vocal chords are responsible. The rest of the chorale completely dissolves, and Mr Marchant buries his face in his hands. Sporadic giggling breaks out amid the pews, and all eyes turn upon the culprit. Lee has endured anatomy lessons, he has heard the dunny talk, he has been there when other boys' voices have broken, and so he immediately realises what has occurred; except the voice is supposed to break, not shatter, and surely fate has not let it be here, in the worst of all places, and now, at the worst of all times. But of course it has.

There is a hopeless attempt by all to maintain control, to complete the hymn, but no, Lee opens his mouth and another horrendous squawk occurs. The boys all giggle and chortle and nudge and push like the water of a maelstrom surging about the shamefaced Lee Parsons, but all that stops when Mr Marchant removes his hands from his face, and glares. The boys battle to bring themselves under control, each confident that Mr Marchant is looking directly at them and thinking of detentions or the cane, but where he is looking is at Lee.

"Parsons, come down here!"

Lee, bewildered, makes his way out of the stalls, while the other boys push and shove. Mr Marchant frowns at them and they allow Lee to pass. He comes to stand pathetically beside the choirmaster, his head hung low, bravely fighting back the tears.

Mr Marchant clears his throat, as if to ensure his own voice produces only perfect intonation, and nothing resembling the abominations of this little monster. He holds his head thrown back, such that while he seems to address Lee personally, in fact his words are directed at all of them. Don't let this happen to you, is the subtext.

"I believe this choir no longer has need of your services, Parsons. You may leave immediately."

The words hold such dreadful finality. None of the other boys are giggling now. Sadly, Lee turns to leave. It is, most of all, the humiliation before the other boys rather than his actual failure that makes him desperate to get out of there. Still there is defiant pride left in him, enough to keep his head up and allow him to walk with dignity toward the door.

And that should have been the end of the matter, but Mr Marchant is a schoolmaster and a master of boys, and he wants, more than anything, that they should respect him. He can't just let it go, can't leave it at that. Look at him. His serpent's mind is racing as he puts it together in his head. He waits, gets it right, holding back until the last second before Lee will disappear outside.

"Look on the bright side, Parsons. Your testicles are now considerably closer to Australia than they were this morning."

Lee stops in the doorway. The other boys erupt with laughter in the pews, quite as they were supposed to, while Mr Marchant looks so terribly proud of his own wit. And it

is not just a geographical reference either, as becomes evident the moment Lee replies, shouting from the doorway in his broad Australian accent.

“Yeah, well, at least I’ve got some, you bloody old poofter!”

Naturally, where this leads is to the Headmaster’s office. Here everything is finest leather or dark polished oak—the desktop, the chairs, the books—all totally dustless and shining despite the speckles that hang in the long rays of sunlight coming in through the gothic windows, prepared for stained glass they’ve never received.

The Headmaster is a tall man, with bulging eyes, bald head, limbs impossibly long—a non-venomous spider in a web of knowledge and wisdom. He seems a detached academic in speech and manner, but beneath faint traces of a caring human being are clearly discernible. He looks at the downcast boy before him and although his knowledge of this particular lad is sketchy, still he sees the situation precisely as it is. In his long history at this school, he has encountered every possible trouble a boy can get into, and knows every possible reason why, and in addition he can still remember being such a boy himself. This boy, this Lee Parsons, is strong and intelligent and resourceful and a good lad, but it is hopeless. Everything is wrong in every possible way. He is as far away from where he ought to be as he can get, in all imaginable senses. The Headmaster also knows that he is utterly powerless to do anything about it.

There are standards that must be met. A breach of discipline of this magnitude cannot be allowed to go unpunished, no matter how easily explained by the circumstances, no matter how apparently unsympathetic he must be. Justice is an impossibility.

“Now Parsons, I do appreciate the difficulties you have suffered with your unsettled home life, and I know it cannot be easy for you to adjust to life here at Finchley, and indeed, here in England, but really, boy, toleration has its limits, and I believe those limits have now been exceeded by a substantial margin.”

Lee stands before him, his eyes are directed towards the floor. Not exactly repentant, just looking like he might be. The anticipated punishment will be the least of his problems.

“Now that sort of language,” the Headmaster goes on, “may be appropriate in the outback, but let me assure you.”

Lee’s eyes jerk up to meet his:

“Never been to the outback, sir.”

The Headmaster draws a breath at this insolence, but holds back, knowing that this is the point in question here. Lee speaks in the voice of someone merely imparting relevant information, getting the facts straight, and he is so far removed from the reality of his present position that no amount of discipline can bring him back. He just doesn’t care what happens to him anymore. The Headmaster must draw on all of his formidable resources to ensure that he remains calm.

“I see. Very well. I believe that you leave me no alternative but to make a telephone call to your father.”

“You’ll be wasting your time. He won’t give a stuff.”

Again a purely informational statement, delivered so bluntly that the Headmaster cannot suppress a shiver of remorse. Sadness clouds the harsh lines of the old man’s face. The father will come and be obliged to take the boy away from the school. That will be the end of it. The only possible end of it. For the Headmaster of a school with as high a success rate as Finchley, defeat comes hard. And all the more so when the boy’s class

work and general demeanour prior to this recent outburst of continual misconduct has shown so much promise. Neither he, nor the boy, nor the system itself, will ever be able to forgive what must inevitably take place now.

The Headmaster gets up from his desk and walks over to the window. The immaculate lawns stretch away to the shade beneath the oaks. The sun shines from a radiant azure sky. The tranquillity out there seems invulnerable, affirming the confidence of an education tradition centuries old. Think about the successes, not the failures.

“Parsons, I believe it will be impossible for you to remain at Finchley.”

“I don’t care.”

“There have been too many disruptions now. Almost daily. You must understand.”

This time, Lee says nothing. The Headmaster looks back toward him. The lack of response creates the opening if he wants it. It is not the boy who must understand, but the Headmaster, the school, civilisation itself. The boy is all emotion, and his rational being has been completely abandoned. Lee Parsons no longer wants nor needs to understand. That is why he can no longer be taught anything.

“Do you have any idea, Lee, why you are doing these things?”

“I don’t like it here,” and then, with stunning maturity, he corrects the statement, “I don’t *want* to be here.”

The Headmaster nods: “Where do you want to be, Lee?”

“I want to go home.”

“Well, no doubt your father will take you there.”

“No,” Lee says, “I mean *home*.”

The Dormitory, late at night, and the cold hand of hopelessness has closed completely around him. Lee sits on the edge of his bed in his striped regulation pyjamas, so utterly, so numbingly, so desperately alone. The boys asleep in the rows of beds would have nothing to offer even if any of them were awake. In the darkness the dormitory can offer no comfort, and when a boy sits alone with nothing about him except the blackness and the faint breathing sounds of the other boys, it portrays a loneliness that has a bleak quality all of its own.

There was a letter that came that day—he found it waiting for him at the lunch break immediately following his fateful interview with the Headmaster. He started to read it, had to stop and flee frantically to the toilet block and hide in one of the cubicles while he read the rest. He stayed in there a long time, had to wait until the other boys had gone to their classes, before he dared emerge. He would be late for his next class himself, but it hardly mattered at that stage. The letter was carefully hidden away and he went to the mirror and examined his eyes intently. The redness of the tears showed—it would be impossible to let the other boys see that.

He went instead far out into the grounds and sat under a tree and even slept in the afternoon sun for a while. He came back at dinner time, now rested and recovered and fit for human company, although utterly sullen and silent. No one asked where he had been—everyone knew what had happened. Mostly they were surprised that he was still there, and that his father had not been to collect him yet. His better friends asked when that event was expected—the only answer was a shrug. They left him alone and alone he stayed.

Now, he sits on the edge of the bed in the dormitory, that letter is in his hand, the pages open, his arms resting loosely on his thighs as he sits head bent. He isn’t reading the letter though—he doesn’t need to. He just holds it for the small comfort that the distant contact of the hand that wrote it can provide. He could, perhaps, kid himself that

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he is restless because he slept in the afternoon, but he knows that isn't true. The time has come. He knows exactly why he is sitting there, why he holds the letter, why he is awake. In his mind, now, he has it all planned, and what started out a desperate fantasy of how he might avoid the inevitable has now cemented itself into a hard reality. The time has come.

The letter, with its arrival, has simply thrown about him a cloak of recklessness, of blind desperation, touching off deep emotions that he knows he can share with no one—certainly with none of these other boys sleeping in this moonlit dormitory—and this in turn has determined that he can't be here when they wake in the morning. In the end he is going simply because it's become impossible to stay.

Hastily, he dresses. Plain shirt and trousers, school socks and shoes; forget the pyjamas. A small bag for torch, pen, plastic bottle, some chocolate, the letter; he whips the blanket off the bed and rolls it up, tying it to the bag, and pauses to make a final check. No, nothing else. He is set. He moves quietly across to the window, opens it as noiselessly as he can, and out he goes.

He emerges onto the ledge and from there can climb down the ivy until he is close enough to jump to the ground. He lands on the wet grass and sits with a thump. Bum soggy from the dew. Great start! Boys have been climbing down that ivy regularly for over two hundred years, but he has to come a cropper. What a dag! Pausing now. So far so good. Then he is up and off. As he goes he pauses at the drinking fountain to fill the bottle, and then crosses to the garden beds and selects a tall angle-iron stake, careful to choose a sapling that he reckons will be able to stand on its own from now on. He pulls the stake and hurries on.

Around the corner, he comes to the bike shed, the bikes hanging from hooks like butcher's meat and locked in a wire shed by padlock and chain. Lee inserts the metal stake through one of the links in the chain. The richest school in the country but they buy these locks and chains from BHS. Lee works out the leverage, leans on the stake a few times, then a great heave and it snaps. The door of the shed creaks as he pulls the bolt and goes in, searching amongst the bikes for the one he wants.

Dorchester's bike—Peugeot—good racing machine—has everything and in top condition—the pride of the school. But he doesn't want that one. He runs his mind through the many braggings of the various boys, although he doesn't think of Wellbridge until he recognises the bike. Just an old Raleigh, yet good and solid, bit of rust and a few squeaks but all the necessary gears and lights and flashers. Comfortable seat. Pack racks front and back. Comes with a pump and repair kit tied under the seat. Good one.

It isn't really stealing, Lee tries to convince himself. Wellbridge comes from a filthy rich family who'll replace it with their loose change, and claim insurance anyway, and probably rip the company off. Wellbridge wants a racer but his stingy father reckons this bike is good enough. Now, it will have to be replaced and Wellbridge won't mind at all. Lee needs it far more than he does. Such Robinhood delusions are needed just to get it down from the hook. After that, it doesn't matter.

He wheels it out, pausing to look and listen. He checks the bike over, examining brakes, gears, how evenly the wheels spin. Just fine. He wheels the bike out across the lawn leaving a telltale track through the wet grass but there's no longer any need to be careful. Soon he reaches the perimeter wall, and locates the place that, when all this was just a fantasy, he had located during the afternoon. There is a tree that spreads one large bough over the wall, and he can climb that all right. He stands the bike on its back wheel against the wall and it takes a little time to get it to stay there. The bag and bundle on the

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pack-rack give it the stability he needs and once he gets the handlebars balanced, it settles into this rearing position.

Now he climbs the tree, inches along the bough, and then awkwardly swings his legs down until they touch the top of the brickwork. He lowers himself, straddling the wall, and then crutch-hops forward until he is right over the bike. He reaches down and is able to grab the front tyre. Still, his position is not a strong one and it takes a considerable strain to lift it, but at last he gets two hands on it, heaves it up, and, stage by stage, manoeuvres it over the wall. It is a frantic, breathless, awkward task. The handlebars catch, then the pedals, and he is thoroughly hot and sweating and irritated by the time he manhandles it over the wall and lowers it on the other side. At last, he lets it fall, and then, swinging his schoolward leg over, leaps to the ground himself. He takes a moment to regain his breath, then picks up the bike and walks it out through the trees until he comes to the bitumen road beyond.

Like most escapes, the initial planning ends here, on the far side of the wall. Even though the letter came that day and he realised it's contents has necessitated this precipitous action, still he has not really made the connection. All he knows is that he has to get out, but he has known that for quite some time. Still, only when he reaches the road does it occur to him that there is only one way to go, one place to go, and he swings into the seat and is away.

