Introduction

HIS FACE WAS just a few inches from mine.

I could make out the blood vessels in the whites of his unblinking eyes, his tight jaw muscles, the smattering of acne across his forehead.

'Who the *fuck* are you talking to?' he spat, his head bobbing and flicking with each splenetic syllable, so close that it filled my field of vision.

I returned his stare, my head tilted back to compensate for the few inches he had on me. Peripherally, I could see that a small crowd had begun to form around us. But I kept my focus on Ben.

Five minutes earlier, I had been at my desk marking the books of the Year 9 class who had just left. It was the end of the school day, and although the air was cold I had a window open to dissipate the collective aroma of 33 14-year-olds. I could hear the playground directly outside as it began to fill with loud and liberated teenagers. Then the window creaked, and I looked up from my work to see the grinning face of a student as he popped his head in, cast a quick look about the room, and then disappeared. Moments later, a hand appeared, launching a large water-bomb into my classroom before vanishing quickly. The missile exploded messily across a table, and I ran to the door and out into the playground. I caught a brief glimpse of the back of the culprit's head as he sprinted off behind the maths block, and even as I called out to him to stop I already knew how fruitless the action was, how pitiful my command sounded.

It was then that I noticed Ben Street heading towards me. Ben was a notorious Year 11 boy, a tall and thickly-built 16-year-old whose aura at Taylor College was so famed that, even on my second day at

the school, I already knew exactly who he was. I had seen the boy who had thrown the water-bomb by Ben's side before; perhaps Ben was providing a cover for his escape. Or perhaps it was just an excuse to do what he loved.

Ben stormed up to me with the urgency of a pit-bull, squared his shoulders, pointed his face down at mine, and barked his question at me: *'Who the fuck are you talking to?'*

I kept myself calm, searched for words, for a response, unsure whether to assert myself or back down.

'Go on, then,' he shouted. 'Try it.'

We held each other's stares. The crowd around us grew with every passing moment, a pulsating but silent audience to this stand-off between the new teacher and the school bully. I found what I hoped would be the correct approach and took a step forward. I knew that I could not let Ben dominate this confrontation, that to do so would be to invite trouble for the rest of my time at this school. I needed to stand up to him, to take a step forward and let him know that I would not be spoken to like that, that I would be talking with his Tutor and Head of Year and informing them of his atrocious behaviour this afternoon, that I would...

Ben interrupted my stream of consciousness with a mocking chuckle aimed directly and openly at me, and then turned and walked off in the same direction as his friend. About me, the crowd quickly lost interest, shouldering their bags and pulling their coats around them, immediately absorbed in indifference or each other. I returned to the classroom. As I removed my jacket, I felt two large sweat stains under my armpits. I looked at the stack of unmarked books, realised there was no motivation left within me, and picked up my bag.

Leaving the school, I drove my rusting blue VW camper van out through Birmingham's suburbs. It was already dark by the time I reached the city's grimy outskirts and pulled up into the lay-by in which

I had been sleeping for the last two weeks. Turning off the engine, I began the familiar routine: drawing the curtains before switching on the light, pulling out the bed and covering it with a multitude of thick duvets and blankets, lighting the gas hobs to boil two kettles, decanting them into my hot water bottles, and then crawling under the covers to wait for the warmth to spread.

A light rain began to fall, and I peered out of the window. My view was a stretch of dual-carriageway, and it was filled with the glinting headlights of the late rush hour traffic as it coursed slowly through the freezing November night. A dim orange glow hung low over the fields behind the road, flecked with drizzle and hiding beneath the dark, shifting sky. I pulled the curtains back in place and looked at my watch. It was six o'clock, Thursday, somewhere near the end of the year.

* * * * *

The really sickening thing, I suppose, was that I was working at Taylor College by choice. I had not fallen on hard times, nor been the victim of any series of unfortunate events, nor the hapless recipient of the swinging caprices of fate. I was living in that van, and I was teaching at that challenging school, because I had decided to.

Seven months earlier, I had been living in Somerset, forging a successful career for myself as an English teacher in a good secondary school. It was my third year of teaching: I had taken my Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) at the University of Nottingham, spent my Induction year as a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) at a difficult school in Cornwall, and then moved to Somerset. By April of that year I was doing well, had established myself as an effective teacher of the subject with both staff and students alike, and was already starting my slow climb up the promotional hierarchy of the secondary system.

But something was wrong.

In part, it was the teaching itself. Despite my idealistic love of education, despite my acknowledgement of it as one of the benchmarks of civilisation, I found that the vocation I had chosen was far more challenging than I had ever anticipated. Beset by a consistent deluge of paperwork and implausible targets, cerebrally strait-jacketed by the rigorous government standards dictating what should occur in every single lesson I taught, and working late into each night after school (and through much of the Easter and Christmas holidays) so that I could ensure that my students received the learning they deserved, I began to fade. My twenties, it seemed, were being stolen from me in an astonishing combination of confrontation and bureaucracy. I loved the idea of being a teacher, loved the nobility and humility of the profession, but the reality of it was far different from my romantic imaginings.

I had also developed a desire to travel unlike any I had experienced before. Until then, I had been able to satisfy the nagging ache of my wanderlust during the long summer holidays teaching affords, and I had spent each August stumbling gleefully through the backwaters of Europe and Asia. But that was no longer enough. I was tired of being just a backpacker, and tired of the absolute meaninglessness it entailed. To backpack is merely to brush the surface of a culture, to travel at such speed that understanding is fleeting and experience blurred. I wanted my travel to have meaning, a purpose, to be something more than just following the trail a popular guidebook had laid out for me and thousands before. I was after a different kind of journey.

The idea for just such a journey came to me one afternoon whilst reading the educational supplement of a national broadsheet newspaper. Nearly half of all England's Newly Qualified Teachers, it said, were leaving the profession within their first five years. Such a statistic was no surprise, I had heard it in many a staff room and

after-school meeting since I had started in the job. The fact was undeniable.

By the end of the 1970s, the number of state teachers in the UK was at an all-time high. The various governments of that particular decade had placed a massive emphasis on education; by 1979, an extra 100,000 people had taken up teaching. Class sizes were low; staff room morale was high. Britain was investing in its future in the most sustainable way it could, through the country's schools.

But in the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher's government noticed that pupil numbers were on the decrease with demography, and immediately saw the opportunity to save money. Approximately 50,000 of all those teachers who had been employed throughout the seventies lost their jobs as schools were squeezed in every department. Local Education Authorities (LEAs) had their budgets cut and council-funded services which gave support to schools were frozen. Between 1980 and 1996, over 900 mainstream secondary schools were closed across the country, and teacher numbers were at an all-time low – with, at the end of the Thatcher-Major Conservative government's rule, only 454,000 teachers to support the 9.8 million children in state education.

When Tony Blair came to power in 1997, he recognised the looming crisis and vowed to do something about it. His government began pumping heady amounts of money into the profession, launching a sentimental but successful advertising campaign to attract new entrants and focusing on education in many of its public statements and speeches. And, for a short while, these efforts met with success. As the 20th century drew to a close, teacher numbers were indeed on the rise once again. Perhaps things, as that campaign song had suggested, really could only get better.

But it didn't last. Recent figures show that there were only 441,000 full-time teachers in the UK for the academic year 2004-2005, fewer

than there had been in 1997 at the changeover of government, and a full ten percent fall since 1981, while the size of the pupil population had remained roughly the same. Two years later, in 2006-2007, it was revealed that most secondary subjects had struggled to recruit teachers and had fallen well below target, even though those targets had actually been lowered. Under Tony Blair and then under Gordon Brown, things didn't get better, and they didn't even plateau. They actually got worse.

And suddenly, I wanted to know why. Why were so many teachers leaving the profession? Why were they mostly those who had only just started? Was there a single reason, or myriad? In light of these questions, an idea began to form. I did not need to launch myself halfway across the world to travel; I could explore in depth my own country, and I could do so with meaning. By wending my way across England and working in its secondary schools, I would be initiating exactly the kind of adventure I craved, and I might also find some answers to the problems facing my profession. I could observe. I could experience. And I could write a book about it.

I was resolved, and handed in a letter of resignation to my Headteacher the following week. Contractually obliged to serve the rest of the year, I had three months left to wait, three months of preparation. First, I needed to decide on duration. To see an adequate number of schools and enough of England to satisfy my intentions, I had to spend at least a year on the road. Such a span fitted nicely: I was after more than the month-long excursions my previous travelling had been confined to, and with a whole academic year I could fully immerse myself in my task, visiting ten areas with just over a month in each.

Next, I needed transport and accommodation – or, better still, both combined. Given that my life for the next 12 months was to be fundamentally peripatetic, the most viable way to live and travel

would be by van. Since childhood, I had dreamed of owning a VW Campervan, so now I bought one – old, rusting and dirty-blue – and set about kitting it out with dented saucepans and chipped plates; thick duvets and thicker hats; a toolkit; engine-oil; scouring pads and washing-up liquid; a pack of journals and a cupboardful of books; and more soap than I was ever going to need.

Finally, I came to the hardest part of all: where to go. As much as I wanted to see the beautiful parts of England – the National Parks, the historic cities, the coastlines and the countrysides – I would find no answers there. If I truly wanted to discover why teachers were leaving, I needed to find the most challenging schools there were, and these would not be in idyllic rural locations. To unearth the answers I sought, I had to find out what teaching was like at its most difficult. To discover where this was, I needed to do some research.

Melding together statistics and figures, I searched for the ten most challenging areas in England for a secondary school teacher. I looked primarily at the LEAs and the individual schools which had come at the bottom of the League Tables, and then followed that by examining anything else which might affect today's teenagers and their capacity for learning. I looked into infant mortality rates, unemployment levels and teacher turnover. I scrutinised population and crime figures, percentages of free school meals within schools, and student truancy rates. From these lists, I began to compile a Top Ten of target areas.

The summer holidays arrived. I filled my hours with planning and reading, and the weeks slipped past without incident. I grew increasingly nervous. I was fascinated by the journey ahead of me, and thought of it every day with obsessive excitement. I was about to experience England's state secondary system in a way that perhaps no-one else ever had, was about to experience England itself in a similarly unique fashion. But I could not ignore the creeping doubts which built as the summer days got slowly shorter, the brief moments

of terror which occasionally ripped me from sleep, or the engulfing day dreams which left me silent for minutes in the middle of conversations and made my friends suspicious. The year I had ahead of me would be fascinating, I knew, but I also understood it would not be without horror.

September 1st came, my departure-date. I loaded my clothes and some food into the van and set off north. It was time to begin.