

MY NEW ABODE – CAPTAIN FROST

As I pushed open the tall imposing side gate I was surprised how light it was to the touch, perfectly balanced on its protruding Iron Gate rides. There was a loud buzzing sound as the gate locked behind me. Slowly I walked up the gravel drive clutching my trusty blue hold-all bag which held all my worldly possessions; it seemed to be weighing me down. As I walked up the beech-lined drive I had the uncomfortable feeling I was being watched. On either side of me green and white enamel signs warned people to ‘Keep of the Grass’.

A huge timber framed door creaked open and standing in the entrance looking down at me, stood the figure of a short fat man wearing a shirt and tie, a red blazer, grey flannel trousers and gold wire-framed spectacles. He had a sallow complexion, and bore the signs of shaving cuts around his neck and chin.

The man welcomed me with the hint of a West Country accent.

‘Zechariah, I presume, perfect punctuality, well done.’ He held out his hand, either to welcome me or take my bag. ‘My name is Captain Frost.’

We shook hands. ‘Now, young man, follow me and shut the door behind you if you please’.

I closed the door with a resounding thump, forgetting to use the polished brass handle. I heard him murmur disapprovingly. This was my first mistake, my face reddened.

‘If you don’t mind, we prefer to close the door quietly, using the handle’.

I nodded in parrot fashion ‘Of course, Captain Frost – sorry.’

Looking at me blankly he said: ‘I say old chap, thank you for addressing me in the correct and respectful manner, no less

than I expect. We have rules and standards, I'm sure there will be more issues to iron-out while you are staying with us, now follow me, please'.

Three boys in the hall stood to one side to allow us to pass as we went through to his office. In unison they chirped 'Good afternoon, Captain Frost' while all the time looking me up and down, the eyes telling it all. It was 'I told you so; a new boy was expected today'. I curved one corner of my mouth in a faint smile towards them, but they didn't respond as Captain Frost ushered them on their way.

'This is my office, Zechariah. There are matters I'd like to discuss with you, please take a chair and we'll make a start'.

Captain Frost's shiny balding head showed sparse white stubble. His animated eyes bulged from their sockets in a menacing smile; short stubby fingers indicated he'd never done any serious manual work, and the starched white shirt with its frayed collar and small rust coloured marks was tight around his paunch, almost bursting at the seams.

I was dressed, in my view in the latest anti-establishment fashion of the swinging sixties. A style that didn't go down too well with the older members of our society, who saw us as anti-authoritarian and thus a threat, how dare the youth reject regular short-back-and-sides' haircut, in favour of the Rolling Stones or Beatles look.

His office desk was an imposing large Victorian mahogany knee-hole double pedestal desk, with a racing-green leather top inset and gold-tooled leaf detail around the border, in the Greek key pattern style, with a set of nine drawers to one side with brass swan neck handles.

The room was at least eleven foot high and boasted a decorative but broken cornice plaster moulding; it retained the original ornate ceiling rose and a wax-polished oak-herringbone

pattern parquet floor which stretched into both bay windows, allowing an uninterrupted view of the front garden and entrance gates.

Captain Frost faced me sitting on a brown deep-buttoned leather upholstered swivel chair; I sat on a metal tubular frame plastic stacking chair, one of several around the room. An awkward and uncomfortable silence followed. From the middle drawer he took out a file with my full name on its cover. I couldn't make out the nature of the contents. Speaking quietly, he asked me something I couldn't hear. My lip reading experience was useless as his consonants and vowels weren't clear — he muttered. He repeated the question, this time in a raised voice.

'Again, for the second time, are you sitting comfortably? If so we must make a start as we have the preliminaries to get through and to cover some details.'

I fidgeted, nodding my head a few times.

'Excuse me; did you hear what I just said? Am I talking too quietly or what?' His voice a little tempered

'Yes, I did', I paused '... some of it'.

'Two words you seem to have forgotten to use, you must refer to me at all times as Captain Frost, as the former is the rank I held in the armed forces, the latter of course is my surname, do I make myself clear? I will not allow any form of insubordination from any boy here in my care.'

'Yes, sorry, Captain Frost'.

'Good', he murmured. 'Let's get on with the matter in hand. Your social service report states that at school you were a good timekeeper and well-mannered, cheerful and tidy but, alas without any qualifications, they say you could have done better, also a nice letter from your mother in Hastings sings your praises. So Zechariah, we shall, take each stage bit by bit, and

then I can form a clearer idea of your intellect, personality and anything about you.

The cover of my buff-coloured folder bore, in large bold capital letters, the title 'Priory Road, Hastings Secondary School for Boys' followed by my name in neatly written longhand. I shudder to think what this document held regarding my intellectual capacity and foibles. The gist was that I was at the bottom of a stream of seven classes, and among the bottom three out of the standard class of thirty four, as well as being in the bottom stream of seven forms.

When I was twelve, however, and much to my surprise, and everyone else's, I came third to the top of the form. My teachers praised me on my English comprehension and mathematics. They were equally astonished when, the following year, I reverted to my original position among the lowest in the bottom stream. My teachers commented that I had the capacity to acquire an education through repetition, while acknowledging that I was kind and generous towards other pupils. In the classroom however as recalled earlier, I spent most of my time staring out of the window, gazing into space. At the age of twelve I had a Saturday morning job at an unregistered old people's home on the corner of Bohemia and Church road. The place was home to a small group of around

8 - 10 residents who as far as I was concerned never complained, certainly not in front of me. My mother worked there as a cleaner I am certain she would have had something to say about any abuse. Part of my (poorly remunerated) duties included fetching coal from the cellar, removing the ashes from the old black kitchen range, and then shopping in Hastings town centre. At Woolworth's I would buy broken biscuits by weight, at a reduced price.

On my return Miss Ralph the home's owner would count out four pieces of broken biscuit, which she placed neatly on a saucer, and then taken round on a tray with a cup of tea or diluted juice drink to her paying guests, for their afternoon tea. Miss Ralph was a frugal spinster who, daily and without fail ate boiled fish for her morning breakfast. The smell was dire, I often left the kitchen door ajar and opened the heavy wooden sash window for fresh air. She didn't like me doing this and would wag her finger at me and give me a dressing down. To earn extra pocket money on the run-up to Christmas day, I went around town, knocking on doors, singing carols, trying to sound angelic in my yet unbroken voice. My efforts were usually well-received, especially by the neighbours in and around the local area.

Captain Frost continued 'Remember, the unwise choices you made in your past or in the future will one day be presented before the Almighty. Also do not forget the old adage about the consequence of one's actions. Any questions before we begin? You, after all Zechariah, are the lead role in the pantomime. Please excuse my little joke.'

I smiled, he laughed, showing off his poor dental work of a bygone age.

'Captain Frost, just to let you know I've shortened my name, from Zechariah to Zac. I have decided I need a fresh start with a new name'.

He banged on the desk hard with a clenched fist, his face red and eyes glaring.

'Zac' He shouted, hurting my one functioning right ear.

'What on earth has made you reject Zechariah, the biblical name, from the Old Testament? I thought you were a normal and well-behaved person, not a malfunctioning idiot. You may not be the brightest star in the firmament but why go and say something like that'.

Pausing for breath he continued, 'Are you some form of idiot? Have you been transformed by decadent music, the 'Sixties' cultural revolution, the stupid songs, long cissy-like hair, no respect for your elders? I will remind you that it was people like me, who, only sixteen years ago risked their lives in action to give you your life. Things would have been a lot different under German rule, I can tell you. What is more, I cannot accept the values and ideas of your generation, this so called freedom of speech rubbish.'

I interrupted his flow of abuse by leaning back on the chair causing the thin metal legs to scrape the floor. His voice rose to a high pitch.

'Sit properly, boy. If you have an accident and fall to the floor you could break your back and have to live in a wheelchair for the rest of your life!'

'Sorry. Captain Frost' I said, a flicker of nervousness in my voice. 'Do you mind if we take this a little bit quieter please — my ear hurts, 'I paused.

His chest expanded with a sharp intake of air.

'Of course, I apologize; my outburst was out of order. Please understand I am responsible for so many boys. With such stress on my shoulders my emotions are a little sensitive, although I am concerned about your wanting to change your Christian name. Your mother gave you this name, in Christ's name, so don't you think its bad form to turn your back on it? Anyhow, I won't impose my own biblical thoughts on you. For your benefit though you ought to discuss this with your social worker Dr Dylen.'

'Actually, Captain Frost, the reason I'd like to change my name is, how can I say this, is to rid myself of any attachment to that woman in Scotland. I don't know why she disowned me at birth and should still have any say in my name or upbringing. Dr

Dylen has already agreed to my new name, as long as I don't use it for any legal reasons. You can ask him if you don't believe me.'

Silence reigned.

'I believe you Zac and I'm happy for you to call yourself by your new name, I will of course discuss it with Dr Dylen. I'd also like to add Zac, that at some point in the future you should look back at your time in Hastings as a good start in life. It's been so much better than some of the boys living here have had. You seem well-balanced but I recommend you seek some type of help, for example a child welfare expert, who will help get rid of your defence mechanism. Not that I'm an expert on the subject. Like all weaknesses, it needs a little adjustment every now and again. But if you do feel you need a counsellor, I'm sure that between us, Dr Dylen and I will do our utmost to help.'

We shuffled awkwardly in our seats,

'At this point Zac, I suggest we adjourn this meeting for the time being. I'll explain the rules and introduce you to some of the younger boys. How about a nice cup of tea? I'm parched, you must be too. Look! There's Mrs. Tucker, she's just come in for her kitchen duties; let's go downstairs and take some light refreshment. We can continue our chat later, a little less formally I hope. We seem to have aired our different points of view enough for one day. Please collect your bag and follow me.'

I could see that had things been different, when the captain was my age he might have followed a different path, but he had been directed by his peers to a destiny not of his choosing.

We walked along the long narrow hallway, its bare pine floorboards covered with threadbare Persian runners. The canteen was off to the right, down a winding staircase to the basement, tables and chairs were set out informally at angles, to seat around fifteen to twenty boys. A polished stainless-steel

shutter filled one side of the room. It was locked to prevent boys stealing packets of crisps to sell on at a profit.

‘Mrs. Tucker, I’d like to introduce to you our new full-time boarder Zac. He is fifteen and keen. I would imagine he would like to sample the Friday night fish and chips. Can you accommodate him, have you enough supplies?’

‘Of course I’ll make sure he has plenty. Sorry, Zac, isn’t it? Such a nice name, short for Zechariah of religious origin I seem to remember. My husband’s family is from Limerick in Southern Ireland, where that name is very popular.’ Her hands opened to me in a gesture of goodwill.

‘I think you’re right Mrs. Tucker, anyway if there’s any problem about tonight’s food I’ll understand if you’re short.’

‘Don’t be so daft’ she smiled, her rosy cheeks shining. ‘I’m never that short, don’t worry, you are in capable hands here and all the boys call me ‘Mrs. T.’ or Betty if you prefer. Not too many formalities on my side. The only thing I ask is that, if you know beforehand you won’t be here for the evening meal, just let me know. It’s such a shame to waste food.’ She beamed as she adjusted her headscarf and her chequered chef’s cloth cap.

Captain Frost asked ‘Could we have two cups of tea then, or coffee if you prefer? As the boys come down for refreshment I shall introduce you to them one by one. Don’t worry about remembering their names in one attempt though. You’ll be sharing a bedroom with five boys; I’ll ask one of the boys to show you to your dormitory, your new home. Tomorrow, after breakfast, which stops serving at nine forty five sharp, I’ll expect to see you in my office directly afterwards, so please be prompt. I have a full schedule planned. We can discuss things such as employment and anything else that may arise. ... So, Zac, enjoy your evening’.

Before leaving the canteen Captain Frost introduced me to a small black boy of about 4ft 9. He had short, curly, shiny hair, wide open eyes and a warm welcoming smile. He was the eldest of twins; only thirty minutes separated their births. Just in from school he wore baggy grey flannel short trousers, well below the knee, one size too big; real leather shoes, worn at the heels, his tie hanging out of a pocket, the top two buttons of his shirt undone and a frayed collar. He spoke in an unfamiliar London dialect, but one I could just about understand, as long as I listened carefully.

‘Come on man. I show you the way; we are up at the top of the house. What’s your name again?’ The old Captain mentioned it, but I kind of forget it’.

I’m not tall but I towered over him. ‘My name is Zac, and you are?’ My introduction must have startled him.

‘Marco’ was his reply.

‘Such a cool name, is that for real or what?’ I raised my eyebrows indicating a question. There was a brief pause.

‘No one here can say my real name, see it’s from Africa, at least I think so; my brother tells me so. Anyway, Marco is what I am called.’

His words stopped me in my tracks. It’s a good name I replied. ‘It’s so cool, you have a brother. You are one of twins, yes?’

He swayed his body from side to side. ‘My brother’s just half an hour older, and not as good at football as me but anyway, he’s a cool dude, just like me!’

Now I have his habit of swaying from side to side. ‘I’m sure you’re right. I said

After walking up several flights of stairs we arrived at my shared bedroom, number 4A, my new abode.

‘Here we are man, that’s your bed by the door; the one next to you on the other side is Johnny’s. He’s a cool guy, really tall

and the bed is too short. One night my brother gets a feather of a squashed pigeon he found in the road and when Johnny was fast asleep, with his feet sticking out the bottom of the bed, he tickled them. Johnny kept on twitching, so funny man; we laughed for hours that night. When you meet my big brother, don't tell him that I told you so, okay man?' He laughed aloud, gyrating at the same time.

'No problem man, I won't say a thing to Johnny. So what's your brother's name? It's not Polo by any chance?' The atmosphere suddenly changed.

'Zac, man, you some sort of spy or someone kind of strange — a witch or something? His name is what you call him.'

'It's just a guess and for your information I know nothing about witchcraft or stupid stuff like that. You see, Marco, I changed a few letters. It makes a lot of sense and it's a good name. Marco Polo's was a real person, an adventurer way back in history. One day I'll tell you about the Explorer, a brave and clever man, I promise, it's cool.'

At that moment his older twin, not quite identical, entered the room. Marco was laughing energetically, hips swaying.

'Polo, this is our new roommate, Zac a really cool man — and he guessed your name and we're both famous.'

In his own way he explained what I'd just said. With the ice broken they spoke in slang about how they might be related to Marco Polo.

'Come on, man, what does Zac mean? I have never heard of such a name.'

'It is short for Zechariah from the bible I think, not as nice as your name.' I was trying to adjust the setting. A common denominator had surfaced, regardless of colour or age. The twins took it in turns helping to unpack my hold all, commenting

how neat and tidy my belongings were. I didn't have the heart to tell them my mother had washed and ironed every garment to a high degree with love, care and attention. I soon realised why they were taking such an interest in my belongings, they were clearly looking for anything to which they could help themselves to.

I gave them a couple of cigarettes each, even though they were only nine years old, with me joking that smoking would restrict their growth. A no-smoking sign on the wall seemed not to make any difference whatsoever. Being at the top of the house they said the staff could be seen coming. A lookout was posted on the landing and the youngest bullied into such a task. The one way up was the perfect position as far as security was concerned.

Things had settled down by now and my belongings were stowed away in a grey stove enamelled steel cabinet, with two doors but no lock.

Johnny and I warmed to each other immediately; over six feet tall, lithely-built, with short-cropped hair and high cheek bones. A dimpled chin complemented the killer look.

He dressed like a mod in a bespoke suit, definitely a head-turner of a teenager in his prime, a magnet towards the opposite sex — a man's man with an endearing and warm south London accent. Johnny and I got off to a good start, sharing as we did similar tastes in fashion and music, bantering constantly about the mini-skirted girls on the streets of London at the time.

Adrian was my penultimate roommate. His physical appearance starkly contrasted to mine with his modest, quietly-spoken and self-effacing manner: long jet black hair parted in the centre and a few chin whiskers. He attended the nearby grammar school and was trying for a university scholarship. About 17 years old, he had lived in the home since

the age of seven. Well-versed in the arts, his interests ranged from poetry to Russian literature. A fan of Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones and the Yardbirds, supporting the anti-nuclear disarmament C.N.D. movement and almost as if to prove it at every opportunity he showed off proudly to all and sundry his substantial collection of left-wing badges. He also wore a Che Guevara style beret.

Adrian later told me, in confidence that both his parents had died in a road traffic accident involving their converted de-commissioned Ambulance. Apparently, the motor home driven by his mother was involved in a head on collision with a double decker bus on the outskirts of London; both parents died instantly but Adrian suffered only minor injuries. With no family to take him, he was put into care. During their search of the vehicle the police discovered a large collection of academic books and the parents' university degrees from Cambridge. Both were apparently outstanding in their chosen fields, and deeply involved in student politics. For some reason Adrian's father had given up his job as a professor of English Classics, sold their possessions and taken to a life on the road where Adrian was educated to a high standard and as a pastime taught to play chess, at which he showed a talent beyond his years.

To reduce tension between the groups and to limit quarrels the dormitory's were divided into full- or part-time boarders, the consensus being that part-timers, with a family support network at weekends and holidays had a tendency to brag obnoxiously, about the large amounts of money spent on them, and regularly ran to Captain Frost with tales of the full-timers shenanigans, which tended to be fabrications and exaggerations. Even Captain Frost showed signs of fatigue and frustration at having to put up with this behaviour.

Simon, who had been in the care system since birth, being moved from one place to another, was the last of our room-mates. We knew he was epileptic, though his fits only occurred when stressed, or subjected to flickering or dazzling bright lights. A bewildered wide-eyed stare was usually the signal he was losing control. He had recently had his thirteenth birthday and was still wetting the bed — and talking in his sleep. A quiet, small boy with thick prescription glasses, he was a little too naïve for his own good. A practicing Christian, he was very honest, never smoked, swore or blasphemed, or spoke unkindly about anyone. In fact, when speaking he rarely made eye contact, unless he had no choice in the matter, keeping himself to himself. Unsurprisingly he was a victim of bullies. On the whole the boys left him to his own devices, a lot of the boys called him ‘Simple Simon’.