

I learnt a lot at school. I first came to the Cathedral school when I was eleven years old. I stood in the sideways rain on my first day, part of a queue of children overshadowed by a mighty and ancient cathedral. I couldn't see the top of that cathedral even when I looked so far up that the back of my head nearly touched my neck. I was surrounded on three other sides by tall buildings which were similarly old. The sky above these was visible but thick with clouds when I looked up.

Since I've left school, I've come to associate September skies with sun, but I remember then it was grey. The air somehow smelt grey too, like the leaves on the floor which had already begun to lose their colour. Around me stood children shuffling on the gravel, scratching their new brown loafers. We said nothing but looked around awkwardly now and then. Some of us shivered, I think.

I don't remember much about what the other children looked like, but I can tell you that there was something vaguely similar about them all. Perhaps it was the rustling of their new shirts or their hair, which amongst all of them had the unmistakable mark of a mother's styling: smart and tidy, but now losing shape in the rain. Maybe the similarity came from how they all held the same gait of slouched backs and loose limbs. We were all waiting for somebody to do something to us.

"We'll soon knock that out of you," came the bleak voice of our Master. He walked along the line of freezing boys and gazed above their heads like ghosts were far behind them. He had one of those bodies that suits always appear too tight for, as if it was somehow constraining all his power. His eyes, too, had this strange look that they were not one thousand years in the past. He'd have suited a world freed from civilised dress and the pretensions that came with it, but here, all those opportunities had passed: we were what was left. He trooped to the head of the queue, and then stopped abruptly.

"Right, everybody into the Cathedral. Quick now." The boys stumbled into life, muttering pithily and shaking themselves for warmth. We began to move as a tightly-packed unit towards the Cathedral, some of us occasionally stumbling to avoid another boy. The rain had got heavier; the clouds from which it fell seemed to linger just above us. The boy in front of me fingered at his hair as he walked, trying hopelessly to get it back into shape for Assembly. Creamy trickles from the mesh of rain and hair gel ran down his forehead and he screwed his eyes in pain. The scent of wet chemicals smelt like those communal showers you find in campsites, never quite clean. I didn't say anything though. It was more important to look anonymous amongst the crowd than to complain. When I walked up to the Master, who was standing beneath the Cathedral door, I tried to stare into the distance like him. "Quick", he ejected, "Quick."

I thought I'd got past, but as I approached the door I found my arm snatched from behind me. While I struggled instinctively the hand that grabbed me remained completely still. I'd been removed into my own space with such calm force that I might have been teleported. Looking down at me was the Master, his jacket straining to fit his arms. "Yes, you boy," he said flippantly. Beside me the children continued to trudge into the Cathedral, not asking questions. One or two of them jolted their heads when I was taken. But once they registered that there was no threat to them, they continued on their way.

I looked meekly up at the Master. He was so tall up close I don't think I could even really see the top of his head, only the bottom where his teeth were. He stood firm, seemingly unaffected by the bolts of water that splattered onto his shoulders. I wriggled again but found no looseness in his grip. This time he noticed my attempt. "Don't," he paused, breathing, "try to break out." I had no hope of escape, I realised, until he was finished.

It must have been the shock, because I suddenly felt the urge to cry. I tried to hold back but I think a few tears rolled down my eyes, undetectable in the rain. He didn't notice anyway, which was what was important. After that, it was a bit easier to speak.

"Why?" was all I could manage, looking at him as he forced me away.

He opened his mouth to reveal grinding teeth. The question had angered him; he didn't understand what possessed me to ask such a thing. His top lip quivered as he tried to contain himself.

"Don't ask questions. You're coming with me."

I tried again, stuttering, "What?"

It was really the same question as before, but it was the best I could do.

If he noticed my mistake, he didn't show it. He turned from the Cathedral and, grasping my back and shoulder, pushed me away from the boys still queuing for Assembly. None of them acknowledged me except a little rattish child who stood half a foot or so shorter than the rest. He turned his head towards me as he walked, making eye contact for the briefest of moments before being combed back into the tide. He might have smiled at me because I felt a little more comfortable after that, even though the Master's grip hadn't loosened; but, if he didn't smile, he gave me that impression anyway. The whole situation seemed a little more funny to me, a little more ridiculous.

As I was being led through the courtyard, my shoulder began to feel a bit crushed where the Master's hand was, but this wasn't painful so much as odd-feeling. When we reached the entrance to one of the buildings, he launched me by the arm towards its door. I didn't really feel like he'd attacked me, though; more that I'd been on some funfair ride, jolted around, uncomfortable, but still safe. I stopped before the door and turned to look up at his face. He was still snarling, trying his best to look threatening. He pointed to the door. "Go in there."

"No." And I smiled.

Now I know exactly where my stubbornness comes from. It wasn't from that boy, exactly, but from an event which, when I think back on, was pretty remarkable. The rain was still smacking down, but – and I hadn't known they could get this close before – a rainbow had formed right behind the Master. I mean, right behind him, and it framed him perfectly under its arch so that he was bathed in flamboyant colours - red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet - all over his face and his suit, so that he looked like a fairy or hobgoblin. With the rainbow up that close everything around him had exploded into those colours: the gravel, the rain, even the Cathedral. It had been summoned for me. I don't know by who, but I know it was for me.

Maybe the Master knew something about this because the only attempt he made to get me back under command was completely feeble. His mouth started to quiver again but much more violently than before, so violently that droplets of water actually came splashing off his top lip onto his boots. As they sprang away they twinkled for a second in the air, lit up by the rainbow. "Get," he said, letting out an audible whimper after he hit the 't'. "Get," he continued, but then paused. He started to shiver, which made his tie swing around a bit. I didn't bother to respond to that interjection anyway, because it was pretty obvious that I wouldn't be following him anymore.

Without fully noticing it, I saw that I was looking down on the Master, whose eyes were now full of tears. It didn't occur to me at first that this was strange but then I realised that my feet were no longer touching the ground. I'd started to float up into the sky. I must have been up there for a while because I can't see how he could have broken down as quickly as he did. I would like to say it felt

fantastic or liberating, but I wasn't really concentrating on that at the time; my attention was dominated by the quivering man below, gushing with tears.

The rainbow remained in front of me though, but I'd now risen close to the height of the lowest clouds, which were still sending down their rain. I stretched my hand out to touch one, and it felt fresh and clean as I let the droplets splash off my palm. They split into little shards of water when they touched me and drifted below, until, as I kept rising, I couldn't see the droplets hit the ground anymore; instead they descended like feathers, sparkling beneath the rainbow's light.

Eventually, I came up out of the clouds at a point where I was level with the Cathedral. I saw the sun above me burning strongly and I knew it was sure to evaporate the clouds below in no time at all. Sure enough, in five or six seconds, the clouds had cleared completely and I was left looking down on a beautiful sunny day. It took a bit longer for the rainbow to dissipate because, obviously, it's the light of the sun that actually creates the rainbow. But, after a while, that went too, and I was left flying about alone in the sky. I took some time to explore the Cathedral's highest towers up close and then, before I descended, made a point of taking in the view of Bristol. People had begun to flock to College Green in the sun and the skaters were out by Tesco too. On my left side I saw the river, which might have been a little swollen from the rain, flowing peacefully towards the Cotswold Hills.

Then, taking a deep breath, I descended slowly to where I'd been queuing to get into the Cathedral and landed with a slight bump on the gravel. There was nobody around; they were all still in the Cathedral for Assembly. Nobody could have seen what happened with me and the Master. I assume that after I floated away he went in for Assembly too but I never found out, and it didn't really matter anyway. I smiled to myself with calm satisfaction, enjoying the warmth of the sun on my back, and checked my timetable to see what the first lesson was.

As for the Master, well, he didn't bother me again. I never had any classes with him so we weren't close together anyway, but I was lucky, because, even though he had a reputation around a lot of the school, I knew he wouldn't dare go near me. I had a terrific time for the rest of my school days anyway: played for the football team, got decent enough grades, even went to Edinburgh and studied Biology. Really, they were the most average school days you could imagine for a kid. Nothing like that ever occurred again. It was just funny that it was on my first day.

I found out about what happened almost by accident, waiting for an appointment at the GP. There wasn't much to read, so I opened up the pages of the local rag. *The Evening Post* isn't the most exciting paper at the best of times, and there was really nothing that grabbed my attention at all, until, on page four, I saw it. And a name jumped out at me: "Nicholas Rawnsley". Master Rawnsley -- the Master. And then I remembered that day. I hadn't thought about it for years. It's amazing how something from your past can jump out of you all of a sudden and bite you on the neck. Until then, I never really processed what had happened to me all those years ago.

But, you know, since I read that article, I've started to feel like I'm not really here at all. Sometimes I can swear that I'm still looking down on that splendid view of Bristol with the clouds clearing beneath my feet and the wind blowing at my back. I know for sure that's where I really am, but then somebody says my name or I start to swerve in the car and I'm brought back to Earth. What's really strange isn't these visions, though, but something else that's been happening. You see, if I get emotional now (and I've never been an emotional guy in the past) some power swirls in me again. When the wife says something cruel or the kids don't talk to me or I'm stuck in another queue of traffic — well, I wouldn't really notice these things before, but now I get a very definite sensation

from them. I'll catch myself drifting off and a moment later — and, please, you have to understand this — I'll look down at my feet to find that, without really noticing it, I've started to float away again.