

# SMUDGER

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When I look back upon my variegated life I cannot help feeling that the person who touched me the most was not a prep school teacher but a young boy who showed me how to live in the face of adversity. More than anything else he taught me a salutary lesson: do not ever inflict your worries onto others.

In my drama school days in London I was once admitted to a hospital because I was stricken with quinsy. The only other occupant in the ward was a freckle-faced 11 year old lad, who had a weak heart. There were other beds, but they remained unoccupied for the duration of my stay.

He was a comely lad with close-cropped hair and piercing eyes. I have rarely come across an eleven year old with sharper intelligence or a sunnier disposition. His mother had died and he lived with his grandmother, a sturdy Cockney lady, his sole visitor. His name was Ashby. I once made the mistake of calling him Ashby-de-la-Zouche and he winced at my lack of originality. It was obvious that he had had his fill of being dubbed as a town. I apologised, and he said "Oh you can't help it. No One can....." But he forgave me with a heart-warming smile.

I owe a great deal to Ashby Salter for acquainting me with some of the oddities of the English Language. It was he who told me that to 'put up or shut up' means to tolerate. "When you put up with someone, it means you can stick him," he went on to say. "Ha Ha!" I said, "that's daft. Stick him like what? Stick him in the back?" "No, silly," he laughed, "when you stick someone like that it means you hate him, but to say you can stick him means you like him," "So" I said "you stick me, I stick you?" "yeah" he beamed.

I had no idea how serious his condition was until he told me one day, quite matter-of-factly, that he had a hole in his heart. "They say I'll make it. Make what?" He said and grinned, "they say a lot of stupid things like every cloud has a silver lining. Clouds don't have linings."

He wasn't bitter when he said this. He didn't know what bitterness meant. The only time he ever twinged with an inner pain was when the night nurse, tucking him in, cooed "Now be good. Remember worse things happened at sea." This was her pet phrase.

"Silly moo," Ashby said after the nurse had left, "Why do worse things happen at sea than on land?" Then, as an afterthought, he said, "What are these worse things?" "Well, Moby Dick, perhaps." I tried to be flippant. "Aw, come on, it's naff. It's like saying 'all other things being equal'. They always say it when they go over me. What other things? And being equal to what?"

There he had the better of me. I could only marvel at his acute sensitivity. He confided in me that it only served to disappoint him when people told him to cheer up. He usually felt pretty cheerful anyway. "I wish they'd stop pitying me", he said, ungrudgingly.

Sometimes I wondered if it was his affliction that gave him a kind of wisdom unassociated with boys of his age. Some of his observations were truly amazing. I had no answer when he asked me why we have to change our clothes during the day when we wear the same pair of pyjamas night after night.

He often used words that I had never heard of. All I could do was to register real surprise and this delighted him no end. 'Hey, smudger' he once said to me and I looked at him quizzically. A 'smudger' meant a friend, a mate; 'brass monkeys' meant cold. "How come?" I asked and he assured me, "It is --- brass monkey's weather, don't you know?" I would learn later that in Cockney lore the racks of cannon balls on board a warship were called brass monkeys.

Other words he taught me were: Rosie Lee (rhyming slang) which meant tea and 'Kate and Sidney' which, of course, was steak and kidney. It certainly evoked the image of a dish more appetizing than our canteen steak and kidney 'pud', which tasted like cat food mixed with chewy stodge.

When I came back to the ward after my operation, Ashby looked after me like an angel. He sat by my bed in case I needed a drink or a tissue. The two nurses who alternated their duties chided him, "Is he paying you a lot of money?" they said flippantly. He remained unnerved. He left my side only when it was time for his grandmother's visit. After she left, he would put the bunch of grapes, which she had brought for him, on my bedside table. I was so touched I nearly sobbed.

I had no idea why he had taken a shine to me. Was it because I was at a drama school and he idolised actors? Or was it because I laughed with him and didn't try to patronise him or treat him as a little boy? It could have been all these things or none. His affection was so unalloyed, so wholehearted that I felt a pang of guilt for not being able to offer him the same amount of unbridled love.

As I got better, his condition took a turn for the worse. He spent most of the mornings in an inner sanctum going through a series of tests and was only brought to the ward late in the afternoon. His face looked flushed and hollow, but he still smiled at my feeble jokes.

When I took leave of him he didn't cry or snivel. "Goodbye smudger, will you come and see me?" he asked, his eyes ever so alert. It was I when shivelled. "Of course, I will," I said, in a gruff voice.

Within a day or two, I had to rush off to a village near Farnham to start work on a farm. It was a two week stint. When I returned to London I went to the hospital to see Ashby.

The ward was full of some old patients, but Ashby was not to be seen. I went to the reception. The matron at the desk informed me that the 'poor boy' had gone to his maker.

My 'smudger' had, at last, made it.

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