

The Enemy Within

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Bob Johnson throws himself into the bracken, sweat beading into his eyes, impeding his vision. The helicopter circles a final time, the bright spot of its searchlight failing to find him, then heads down valley, finally disappearing into the late October gloom. He waits, counts to sixty, then eases himself into a sitting position. It isn't the first time, and it probably won't be the last, that he'll look up anxiously into the sky. He wipes his glasses, shrugs his rucksack, and digs out the old map. He squints; to the north lie the coastal resorts of Rhyl, Colwyn Bay, and Llandudno - vague memories of childhood holidays; to the south, the oranges, browns, and greens of Snowdonia. He runs his fingertip lightly over the surface, then stops. He must be *here*. He jabs at the map. Somewhere here. Peering more closely, his eyes fix on the mountain village of Capel Curig, its solitary shop, the sharp bend in the road, and the long, steep hill that follows. That was an hour ago, so yes, he's here; and the safe-house *has* to be close-by. Map stowed again, Bob forces himself to walk on. He's been walking for days - is it four? or five? – and he's nearing exhaustion. Thirty years ago, he'd have taken these hills, no problem mate, but that was then, and this is now, 2042. A field away, headlights suddenly arc through the air, illuminating the intervening bog. Bob ducks, instinctively shielding his face, and continues walking only when the sound of the engine fades to nothing. He trudges on, one weary step after another, and allows his mind to wander...

*He'd always wanted to teach. 'For God's sake son, don't do it!' His late father's voice competes with the pounding of his heart and rasp of his breathing. 'Take it from me, Bob; from one who knows!' He manages a grim smile, negotiates a large boulder, then walks on. Maybe, but maybe, the old man had been right all along? Perhaps, he'd been a fool to follow his parents? No!* Bob shakes his head vigorously. 'No!' he shouts into the void, and is startled to hear his voice returning to him, not once, but twice - as if to emphasise the point. *The Noughties had been good years, hadn't they? Hard work, yes, but we'd had some choice in*

*what we would teach and how we taught it.* He strains to recall the details. *But... when did it all change? When did they take control?* A slip of boot on wet rock jolts him back to the moment, and he takes out the map again. High on the hillside, barely visible, a dim light flickers: *the safe-house?* Bob pauses, nods, then starts the long climb.

The cottage and outbuildings are quiet - almost pitch black - and *quiet*. Clearly an old farm house, 'Hafod Wen' is now devoid of animals - not even a sheepdog to alert the present occupier of Bob's cautious approach. He peers into the darkness, scanning the roofline, the doorway, the gutters above the windows – no signs of a camera, none that he can see, anyway – and reaches the door. Two raps, then the pad of slippers on floorboards.

*'Helo? Be dach isio? What do you want?'*

A local accent, that's good. Bob's throat tightens. 'Socrates sent me.'

'Socrates?'

'Yes, my cousin, Socrates; he sent me.' Bob holds his breath. A few seconds pass.

'Well then, you'd better come in.'

Bob hears a key turning and the metallic click of the lock. The door opens, just a crack at first, and he sees the head of an old man: thinning hair, almost white; thick glasses; rough stubble on an angular chin.

*'Croseo. Welcome.'*

The old man ushers Bob towards the open fire, and takes his rucksack. 'Sit yourself down. I'll make us a *panad*.' He looks at Bob and smiles. 'A cup of tea,' he explains.

The tea is strong and warming - just what he needs - and Bob settles back into the old armchair.

‘Been walking long?’

‘Four or five days – I’m not really sure. Time just sort of...’

‘Yes, yes, I can believe it! Here, have another biscuit.’

They sit quietly until the old man breaks the long silence.

‘So, why are you here?’

Bob shuffles uneasily, then finally says, ‘Well, you know I’m, - I *was* - a teacher, right?’

‘Well, the password says it all. Socrates – that’s the one for teachers.’

‘Yes, of course. And thank you... sorry, I don’t know your name.’

‘And that’s how it’ll stay. But, let’s settle on David, shall we? And I’ll call you George.’ Bob nods his assent. ‘So, George, what brings you to a safe house? What did you do that was wrong?’

Bob considers how much to reveal... even a safe-house may not be as safe as it first seems – but the old man is waiting, hands folded gently in his lap. ‘Well, firstly, I don’t consider I have done anything *wrong*.’

‘No, of course not! I mean, what did they *accuse* you of?’

‘Socratism: *The dangerous encouragement of young people to think critically and to question the world about them.* You know - ask questions, hold opinions, think for themselves, etcetera.’

'Ah. In the eyes of the Ministry, a Category 'A' crime?'

'Absolutely! The full description says something like, *and encouraging young minds to consider dangerous notions of freedom and democracy with a view to changing society and the wider world*. It's on a par with treason and murder!'

David shakes his head, sadly, then places another log on the fire. Here, give me your cup. I think you might need something a little stronger, and I'll make us something to eat.'

An hour later, empty bottles by his feet, Bob stretches. The warmth of the fire, a full belly, and the effects of the beer are loosening his tongue.

'So, were you a teacher too?'

His host knocks back the dregs of his whisky. His fourth or fifth glass, Bob thinks. 'I was. Twenty years at Ysgol Capel Curig. You probably passed it on your way. Just a shell now, of course. The Ministry closed it down at the start of the Tidying Up Programme – or *Liquidation* Programme, as we preferred to call it.'

'And did the Vacuuming Squad pay you a visit?'

'The school, yes, but not me personally, thank God! I got out, retired, a couple of years before those buggers arrived...'

'Did they make arrests?'

'Just the one. A young woman, in her second year, I think.'

'And her 'crime'?'

‘Like yours – she used to hold discussions. Somebody in the village contacted the Ministry and they came and spirited her away. In the holidays, by all accounts. She’s probably in a Re-education Facility now. Poor wee thing.’ David indicates Bob’s empty bottle. ‘Another one?’

‘No, I will need to keep my wits about me tomorrow.’

‘I understand.’ A loud peep fills the air. ‘Ah! It’s time for the daily tele-cast. Want to see it?’

Bob nods silently and, with a wave of David’s hand, a large screen, part of the wall, kicks into life. The first part of the broadcast is all predictable stuff: William and Kate are visiting one of the last vestiges of the Commonwealth; tensions continue to rise in the Far East; Manchester teams dominate the new Pan-European League. Following the anthem, a moustachioed man in a blue and red uniform appears. Behind him, a map of Britain, a festoon of steady green, and red flashing dots, each one representing a capture, or a fugitive still at large; and along the base, a banner boldly proclaiming ‘We’re Tidying Up Britain!’ the Ministry’s all-too-familiar slogan. Bob sits up, feels his body stiffen.

The man looks grimly into the camera and begins: ‘Good evening.’ He speaks solemnly and with gravitas. ‘I bring you the latest update on the government’s Tidying Up programme. As you can plainly see, the number of green dots continues to rise as we find, apprehend, and process those that would harm our children - YOUR children!’ His voice rises dramatically, but quickly drops again. ‘Every day, members of our Re-Education Force find and remove dangerous individuals from our schools, colleges, and universities.’ With the mention of each institution Bob hears the knuckles of the man’s right hand slap into the palm of his left. He stops, shows his teeth, the false smile vanishing in an instant. ‘But we *cannot* afford to be complacent! They are the enemy within! Deviants and evil propagandists, hiding in plain sight!’ He jabs a finger at a slew of red dots, one of them, Bob notices, covering Chester.

‘Here, here, and here, men (and women!) – people we trusted! - continue to poison the minds of those they profess to educate! We must, and we *will*, prevail!’ He straightens his tie and smiles again. ‘Until tomorrow.’ He speaks more softly, reassuringly. ‘And Remember: *Ears and Eyes expose the Lies!* Together, we *will* tidy up Britain!’ The first bars of the anthem, another wave of the old man’s hand, and the smiling face is gone.

Bob slumps back in his chair, pale, his breathing now audible. In spite of the fire, he feels a shiver run down his spine and he takes a moment before speaking. ‘Thank you. That reminds me of why I did what I did, and why I am here now, with you, in the mountains.’

‘Bit of a shock, was it? Seeing yourself, a flashing red light, on the screen?’

‘Yes, you could say that...’ Bob leans forward and rests his head on his knees.

‘So, what was your subject?’

‘History, with a bit of English.’

‘A secondary school, then?’

‘Yes, secondary. A big one.’

‘So, whereabouts were you teaching, then?’

Bob looks up and settles back into his chair. The old man is eyeing him closely. ‘Wallasey – on the Wirral,’ he lies. *Too many questions! This is a safe-house.* ‘Look, I’m all done in. I need to get my head down.’

‘Well, the room’s made up. You will be staying for breakfast, of course? I do a good eggs and bacon –all from local farms.’

‘Thanks, sounds great. And then I’ll be on my way.’

‘In any particular direction?’

Bob thinks quickly. ‘Not sure, but I’ll stay in the hills for a few days. Lie low again.’

David clears up the bottles and glasses and shows Bob to his room. ‘That’s my room, and there’s the bathroom. So, I’ll wish you *nos da*, good night, and I’ll wake you at around eight.’

‘Night, David. And thank you.’

At about three, Bob wakes with a start. His breathing’s hard and shallow, his hands clammy.

*Too many questions. Far too much information.* He dresses quickly, feels for his bag, and steps onto the landing. Next door, David is snoring – an old man’s whistle. Bob tiptoes past, each creak of the floorboards an assault on his ears. Suddenly, the snoring stops, and so does Bob, his descent resuming only when David snorts in a noisy inhalation of whisky-tainted air. Finally, he’s at the door and lets himself out, closing it silently behind him.

He’s used to the dark, but sticks to the road as much as he can. At the foot of the hill he reaches a stream, fast flowing towards the south. He finds his mobile, switches it on, and once its packed carefully in a sandwich box, sets it adrift. If they’re tracking him, that should buy him a few hours. But, the law on mobiles is strict, and he’s taking a risk...

He heads north, sticking to the western side of the valley and the Roman road he forced himself to memorise from the map. As he suspected, its potholed and little used, slate scree making it, in places, impassable for vehicles. He walks as fast as he safely can but makes slow progress. Two hours later, he sees the first headlights, high on the far side of the valley, but surely, he thinks, they’re too far away to worry about. Even in daylight, at this distance he



couldn't be more than a speck on the valley floor; at best, just another walker enjoying the fresh air...

As dawn breaks, he hears a sound he's been dreading. The drone's approaching fast, thirty metres up, the whine of its rotors getting louder with every passing second. In an instant he's in the lee of a crumbling stone wall, lying flat. He covers his eyes, a peep allowed only as it speeds away in the direction he's come from. He breathes again, the glint of a large metallic pod confirming that it's just on its way to make another delivery.

The disused railway line he's been expecting appears at about lunchtime. He thinks back to David's offer of bacon and eggs, then forces the thought away. He's hungry and weak, but must push on. The line – overgrown, and shaded by high trees – veers west, towards the bridge over the Menai Straits and Anglesey: he's getting closer. Five more miles and he finds a signal box. It's a ruin, but he curls up on the floor and grabs a couple of hours sleep before setting off again in the burgeoning darkness...

When he gets to the bridge, he stops. *Three ways to do this*, he thinks: The road – *too much traffic*; the old railway line – *too obvious, cameras*; the web of supporting girders – *30 metres up, but...* He takes a moment, then starts to climb. The metal is cold and wet and the girders not designed for this. Ten minutes in and he's nearing the top of the first arch, with three more to go. He tries not to look down – heights were never his thing – and ignores the crash of waves, far below. By the time he is three-quarters there, he's almost done in. His legs and shoulders ache from the effort and his eyes sting from the sweat of his brow – but still he climbs on. Eventually, and to his own surprise, he's over, and collapses to the ground. But he cannot rest; there's still twenty long miles to go...

He fights his way through a mess of brambles and re-joins the railway line. To his right, the main Holyhead to London road; to his left, views of the sea and the western hills, but this is no time to admire the view. Now, the walking is level and easy, and with his destination almost within his grasp he pushes on.

By the time he gets to Holyhead he's muddy and exhausted. It's nearly eleven, the streets almost deserted. However, this is a port, a favourite haunt of Ministry spies. As he skirts the old railway yards he spots a man, and the man spots him. He's loitering, appearing to look in a shop window. Bob reads the sign – a toy shop. At this hour? *They're dressed like you or me*: something someone once said comes back to him. Bob decides to brazen it out, *to hide in plain sight*, in the words of the ministry spokesman. 'Awright, mate?' His best Cockney. 'D'you know if there's an 'otel round ere? I'm cream crackered!' The other man eyes him closely, taking in the beard, the muddied boots, the rucksack - makes a decision, then directs him down the hill. Bob winks, lets out a large sigh, and moves away quickly.

Faint echoes of walking these streets as a small child guide him towards the harbour, and now he's standing in the embarkation hall. The place is thronged with people, all looking just how he feels. There are babies asleep in their mother's arms, small children whining, exhausted, and ready for bed, fractious teenagers consulting their mobiles, and anxious fathers inspecting their e-tickets. Of course! - it's half-term, and the Irish are making their regular pilgrimages back to the Old Country.

He finds a bench and lets his rucksack slip to the floor, rummaging around the base until he finds his passports – he selects the green one, a golden harp embossed on the cover. It's getting close to mid-night and people are starting to move towards the two desks marked 'Passport Control'. Bob joins them and selects the one to the right, where a callow faced

official is having problems with a large family, the father of which seems to have over-indulged in the dubious pleasures of the boat-train bar. The youngster looks frazzled and ready to go home. Eventually, it's Bob's turn.

'Mobile?'

'Ah, Jaysus! It's in the bottom of the sack,' he says in an Irish brogue borrowed from his late father. He can do a drunken Dubliner as well as anyone and starts to fumble with the straps of his sack, all fingers and thumbs. A gruff voice from behind shouts angrily. They want to be moving on. 'Here, take this,' Bob says, and hands over his passport.

'Oh, it's an Irish one,' the young man says, 'so, don't bother with the mobile'. He runs his eyes over the name: *Robeard MacSeain*, matches face to photo, then snaps the document back, waving him on. 'Next!' He's through, and heads for the harbourside. Overhead, he hears the whirr of another drone. He increases his pace. He's almost there.

There, like a huge, white, whale lies the boat. It's grumbling to itself, keen to leave the bustle of the port behind, anxious to be breasting the waves again. High above, a white mast rotates, its light flashing on, then off, counting the seconds until the anchors are weighed and they can all bid goodbye to Britain and all that it represents.

The air is full of salt and oil and the cry of seagulls. Bob breathes it in, deep, sets his foot onto the gangway and starts to climb. 'I'm Robeard MacSeain,' he says softly to himself and smiles, then rolls his eyes upwards and mouths a silent thankyou to his parents in the sky.