

The Sandpit

by Wil Roach

The school bell rang for our fifteen minute break.

Great! I can join the others in the playground for a game of flick cards.

I hurried to pack my books into my satchel, and with two friends, Thomas and Riccardo, ran down Fryent Junior School's stone corridor into a light cool spring day to the tune of shouts from Riccardo, a burly boy with dark skin like mine, and a piercing voice.

'Come on or we'll be late for the match!' We were both aged nine, and had been friends before my arrival at Fryent in March 1970. We reached the brick wall out of breath but far enough away from the noise of most of the other children to be in our own oasis of enjoyment.

I pushed into the huddle of boys who were gesturing and laughing as one boy readied himself for the contest. Before him a row of eight football cards lined up against the wall showed the crest of the Manchester United Football team. The boy held a single card between his fingers with an eye closed, aiming at the row of cards, and then with a flick sound it flew through the air, hit the cards, but failed to dislodge any.

'Aaah' was the initial reaction from the group, and then we turned on him chanting, 'You lost, you lost, you lost,' the chorus dying to a whisper. The boy who'd picked the 'winning card' off the ground and thrust it into my hand was the owner of the cards, my friend, Phillip. We looked into each other's eyes but neither of us spoke as I placed the card between my fingers, bent my body into a crouch and proceeded to flick the card with vigour as if I were punching

someone. It hit the Man U cards, demolishing the display.

'Yes, yes,' the boys shouted. 'He won.'

All except Phillip, whose face had reddened, which meant he was angry. Turning away from him, I accepted the backslapping from the boys – 'You're great!' – as my smile began to thin and disappear.

I recalled the day my friend Sharon – pale-skinned, slightly taller than me, with sandy blond hair – watched the game from a distance and was curious.

'Why aren't girls allowed to play flick cards?' she asked.

I avoided her gaze. 'Well, it's about football cards and which team you support,' and then, my tone coarsening, 'Girls don't play football do they?' She remained silent but was confused. I hoped this would end what I felt was a pointless discussion, thinking, *Sometimes girls don't get it*, and irritated that I should have to explain this ritual.

'You have a pack of your favourite football team cards, you take some of the cards from your pack, line them up against the wall, your opponent takes a single card and flicks it against the standing cards, and if he knocks them down he wins the other boy's pack of football cards!'

Why would girls care about that? I thought, as if it should be self-evident to her.

The sign for us to return to our classroom was a 'tingling, tingling' bell sound as a teacher slowly walked around the playground, ringing the bell by hand.

My enthusiasm of the last fifteen



minutes and my excitement about winning had vanished as we walked silently back to our class. The boys called our teacher 'The Kangaroo' on account of her height and being Australian. I had no idea where Australia was, but Miss Smith, white as chalk with greying dark hair, was a teacher I grew to dislike. One day her finger grabbed my ear, twisting it repeating as she asked, 'Don't you understand?' and I tried to get away from her.

As I entered Miss Smith's classroom, I took a chair and desk next to a seated Phillip, whispering to him, 'When can I have the pack of cards I won?'

He ignored me. 'Phillip did you hear me?' There was no response from him.

As Miss Smith announced, 'Class, can you have your book ready?' with her finger poised at the chalk board, I realised he wasn't going to give me his cards. Anger consumed me and I ig-

nored his presence for the rest of that class.

Ever since we'd met on my first day at the school, I'd been struck by Phillip's quiet refusal to do anything he didn't want to do, usually with a silent stare or the words, 'No Wilfred'. This meant in tone and quiet measure that he



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had made up his mind.

He told me that he had siblings but they weren't at the school. He also told me, 'Dad doesn't live with us anymore'. His father had left their home after a row with his Mum.

My family was important to me in a way I could not name, but although Phillip's Dad wasn't present in his life, that never bothered me even though it did cause concern to other children. Phillip told me he would be teased: 'You're an orphan, you don't have a Dad'. I remembered what Dad would say to me on a Sunday after lunch, quoting from the Bible, 'Let not you judge lest you be judged by others'. I hoped God didn't judge me for my thoughts, as I knew I was a bad boy, yet in moments of guilt I searched my thoughts and could find no convincing evidence that he would find me innocent.

I felt an increased sense of responsi-

bility and increased feelings of protectiveness towards Phillip as he did not have a father with him,

At first I would see him in the playground standing alone and would approach with, 'Hello, Phillip,' eyeing him, and he would respond with a simple, 'Hello, Wilfred,' with his eyes to the ground. And so our conversation would follow tentatively. Since we both lived on the same housing estate, I would look out for him and travel home with him on the No. 52 bus and we'd chat about this and that. I was happy just to be in his company.

Still, I was protective of information about my home, reluctant to talk about what we did there. I remembered Mum's words about 'not discussing our business or washing our dirty linen in public' which was one of her favourite sayings.

I obeyed my mum's repeated strictures about not referring to 'our business' nor inquiring into anyone else's. *Why can't I speak about what we do at home?* I thought. Although I wanted to tell Phillip about my family life, the moment never seemed right, and he remained sad, quietly sad, about his own home life. I fantasised, comforting myself with the thought that as an adult I would be able to say and do exactly what I wanted.

Phillip was taller than me and slim, pale-skinned, and with a shock of blond hair. He enticed me with a softly spoken reticence. His voice was soft in comparison with some of my louder friends like Riccardo, and I had to listen carefully to understand what he said.

I was worried that as Phillip had ignored me at school it would mean the end of our friendship. I couldn't tell Mum. I could never bring friends home or play with them after school. So how could she help? I held onto my feelings of anger towards Phillip. But I missed him.

One morning again not seeing Phillip on the bus to school, I thought about ap-

proaching one of our mutual friends to speak to him about the cards. Riccardo, who had been born in London to parents from the Caribbean island of Barbados, came to mind. The thing about Riccardo was that he had no 'off' switch when it came to speaking, particularly in class. He'd talk incessantly in a nasal twang about '... *Dr Who*, and did you see what happened with the Daleks, and I think he should have been exterminated ...'

Miss Smith did not appreciate what meant, she only saw me sitting next to Riccardo, and I was the one called up to explain why I was talking. I stammered, 'Well, you see Miss ...'

That was enough. 'Wilfred, go and stand in the dunce's corner and turn your back until I say you can turn round.'

This humiliation usually lasted the remainder of the lesson. I swore never to speak to Riccardo again but always did. He had such an irresistible smile and story to tell.

No, I thought, I'll have to sort this out myself. My other friend, Thomas, told me that disputes over the cards were resolved by both boys fighting it out in the school sandpit at the end of the school day. The sandpit was located at the end of the playground, built high off the ground. There was a significant risk of being caught by the headmistress, Mrs Barnwell, or even being caned with a long thin piece of wood applied to the backside or, if you were lucky, on your hand. Whatever the punishment, it would be followed up with a written letter to your parents.

To use my fists to resolve my dispute with Phillip seemed silly but I felt hurt and thought this act of physical violence might take the emotional pain away. I steeled myself to go up to Phillip during the lunchbreak in the school playground. He was standing by himself in deep thought. I wondered whether he was thinking about the 'incident'.

As I approached he pretended, by turning his head away from me, that he had not seen me. When the moment

came, I tried hard to look at his face but found it difficult and kept looking away too. But I managed to tell him I was not happy about the flick card game and wanted to resolve it with a fight after school.

‘Would you come?’ I asked.

After a short hesitation he said, ‘Yes,’ in the soft voice I had come to know and like. I thought *This is it*, as I swiftly walked away, feeling a sort of happiness mixed with fear and asking myself, *Can I really do this?*

My thoughts ran on to, ‘*My friend, Phillip*’. I had my doubts but I was determined to go through with it.

Phillip and I both understood that we’d meet in the sandpit before 5 pm and I had to use my cunning to evade any teacher. It was understood that if you didn’t show up then you had ‘bottled it’, which meant the other person had won the argument and it was settled in favour of the one who had turned up.

As I hid in the boys toilet, I was sure just by this action I would not ‘bottle’ it and as I waited I realised that I would be late home. So Mum would know something was wrong. I always followed Mum’s rules to the letter, never overtly questioning her unquestionable authority. But here I was hiding in the toilets, evading Mrs Barnwell and every other teacher. So I put an iron fence in my mind between that heavy concern and what I was getting myself involved in. If I was caught, I would get at least the cane and also lose a friendship. But I didn’t really know what else I could do about the situation.

It’s now or never, I thought as I sensed it was time for me to leave the toilets. I stealthily muffled the sound of my breathing and footsteps as I left the toilet. I looked around, and with not a soul in sight, I focussed on the quickest way to get out of the school block and to the sandpit.

I also seemed at that moment to have a remarkable freedom that did not exist for me in the school day – that is, I could

go where I wanted and no one would stop me or ask me questions. Before I knew it, I was at the edge of the sandpit which was boarded high by wooden beams, which could be seen from Miss Barnwell’s office even though it was located on the edge of the playing field.

I didn’t think she was in the office, but still you never knew. The old girl sometimes appeared seemingly out of thin air with a nasty look on her face.

The minutes hung heavily and then in one bewitched moment, Phillip was standing in front of me.

I felt myself soften as I gazed at him but then corrected myself, remembering why I was there. Without a word I stepped into the sandpit. Phillip followed. The scene resembled those boxing matches, Muhammed Ali vs. Jo Frasier, favoured by Dad and Mum, which we had to watch as a family, the only upside being that I got to stay up late!

Now that I was steeled to fight, I put my fists up. They had the capacity to seriously hurt someone taller than me, even as tall as Phillip. This worried me but I could not turn back now. I stood and waited. I realised that despite all my anger at the idiocies and injustices that adults had perpetrated against me, I had never hit anyone. I always took it out on myself, I thought, and at this moment my tears began to flow.

I recalled one of Dad’s Sunday stories of a great uncle in his twenties who was a ‘huge’ man and had sworn at his mother, who was a small woman. Dad said she threatened to hit him with her hand, and he said, ‘Mama, if you wish to hit me then I shall keep my hands at my side like a gentleman’. And here I was wanting to strike a dear friend!

Then my words came *sotto voce* addressed to Phillip ‘I’m going to lower my arms and if you want to hit me, that’s fine, I will keep my hands by my side’. Then I added, ‘You are my friend and I could never hurt you’.

With a great sense of relief, I rested my arms by my side. Tears came to my

eyes again and to Phillip, who had said nothing up to that moment.

‘I am your friend, and sorry,’ I continued.

Phillip regarded me for a moment with both his fists held high. He did not reply but slowly lowered his fists and started to cry. We each moved towards the other in the middle of the sandpit and we embraced, holding each other tight – I with my eyes shut. Then after what seemed a long time, we moved apart, looked at each and laughed. In that moment I knew our friendship was as solid as could be, and we walked away, arms wrapped around each, laughing together at the day’s nonsense.

Postscript

A few years later Phillip followed me to secondary school where we remained quiet friends. But he spoke little and seemed lost. He left school when the official school leaving age was raised from 14 to 16 years.

I heard nothing more about him but often wondered what had happened to him. Then one day many years after I had left school and was working, a mutual friend told me Phillip had joined the army which, given what I knew of him, astonished me. And that not long afterwards, he’d been in a brawl in the notorious Neasden Underpass near our old school. And had been stabbed through the heart and died shortly after. I was stunned and devastated knowing that I’d never had the courage to remind him of that day. I visited the site where he died and said a silent prayer for him, with those same tears in my eyes.

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