



Freddie the teacher

Merlin Smallbone

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Non-violent Freddie can't avoid being a violent video game character in Colchester 2076. He gets sucked into brutality and betrayal to survive. He's an inspiring teacher which leads loyal pupils into dangerous situations which allows them to show skills and resolution. Is there any way to beat violence, disappearances, state corruption and economic collapse? If there is then Freddie has no alternative but to walk the tightrope.

In this book I look at how violence is accepted and made acceptable, the human cost of being a leader and harnessing collective goodwill to break the cycle of retribution.

Merlin Smallbone is a prolific author. Visit vulpeculox.net/books for books on crime, mediaeval history, science fiction, poems and short stories.



Preview

The full version of [Freddy the Teacher](#) by Merlin Smallbone is available in the following formats.

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Warning for self-appointed, tight-laced guardians of others' morals:

- This book contains necessary violence which is intended to be shocking. *What's the point otherwise?*

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Colchester 2075

Freddie didn't want to go to the stonings anymore. Last autumn he'd been at the front of the crowd at the ramparts of Colchester Castle with his two half-bricks. He'd spent many odd hours out the back of the *Rose and Crown* aiming at a the fence posts but he wasn't a natural marksman. Still, it was a way to pass the time. Somebody must have seen him and turned it into a video game. One of the players you could choose had Freddie's black droopy mustache. Another had Freddie's flat-top ginger hair that made him look like a cool cross between an Orangutan and a coconut. Another had Freddie's spindly legs and absolutely parallel torso. The final player you could pick had Freddie's pale blue eyes scanning from behind slits of dry, crinkled skin. In the video game they started with stationary targets then birds then random passers-by. After these harmless levels they begin to get various sorts of retaliation, so the game players need masks, body armour and stooges. They have to train their stooges, then it gets more serious when the stooges demand the player lead an example attack on a symbol of the establishment such as a kindergarten. The stooges have to be kept enthusiastic – how to do that is something the player needs to find out. Then the player is called to a conference where they have to show their loyalty to the state by erasing their weakest third of

followers. In the gameplay there was a strong suggestion that the player's girlfriend was the main obstacle to success. He was easily identified as the game was called Freddie.

He didn't have a proper girlfriend even after he became famous from the game. He was Twenty-four! He didn't have many men-mates either. With mates and maids he could see the words but the chalk wouldn't write on the board. He wanted mates to want him. He wanted maids to crawl to him. Freddie's private life was sterile so he minimised it. Until last year he had been meeting two housing officers. On alternate nights. Who worked in the same department. And found out. And complained. So he explained in terms of utmost anguish to each of them how the other was clinging and demanding so wasn't there anything fishy they could find against their rival in the housing department? Suddenly, 'the trapdoor of justice' and all that, Freddie went from two to no girlfriends. He lusted after a harem of sixth-formers occasionally imagining commanding the boys to beat money out of whoever he decided. He'd got used to being his own tyrant. No woman to boss him or ask favours. That was his stoning period. Now he hated the fact that the whole world played the game called simply *Freddie*. There was no escape for him and no class to help him so he must climb the sheer face of his poisoned legend alone.

At the sixth-form college he filled the legend of a big bad man. When he walked into the classroom there was silence. This was his real game. It always started with some random pupil being humiliated. Fear is a great leveller. "You're getting too chubby Dennis." or "Do you like my new trousers Rose?" or "Hand's up all those who think I'm the best teacher in the school." This last was a great success. "And you my dears are my favourite pupils. You listen, you work hard, even Eustace makes an effort." Eustace was like a cross-eyed cat who tried hard but was puzzled when there was nothing caught under his pounce. He was puzzled rather than depressed as he'd never really known success. "I tell you what – here's the deal. You all pass the end of term exam if Eustace passes. I already know most of you will get a double credit. God knows you deserve it! You have to put up with a monster like me. Now let's get down to that homework of four – eight – twelve or – sixteen lines of poetry on 'sparks'. Swap around and we'll sneer at the failures and wonder how the others are so clever.

Absolute power in the classroom is a drug. Most kids are indifferent to learning, so make them choose between failure and acceptance. Freddie shows them what he wants and encourages anything encouraging. He keeps them under pressure except when he wants something really good from them; then they have to worship him. In every class there's at least one teenager, often several, who want to squeeze their adolescent feelings

all over Freddie. The boys take their lead from the head teacher. He'd wanted to stop Freddie from writing personal comments at the bottom of classwork but he could imagine the clicking together of half-bricks all too clearly. The State inspectors had found the previous head lacking and remarked favourably on Freddie's iron grip of his students so the head decided to humour and encourage Freddie as there didn't seem to be an alternative. Freddie was a perfect role model and critic. He would write things like 'Cool writing Johnnie but if you won't get the girls if you dress like a screwed-up Coke can.' 'Come on Joanie. Just for me. Slim your writing to half the size and lose a couple of pounds yourself.' 'Georgie my mate, I think you've been forgetting that little deal we have: If you write well then I don't let your father know where you're hiding.' 'Love you Cindie. Beautiful writing but it drifts. Stay on the target.' 'Gloom Reggie! You know what happens to idiots. Perhaps you were playing stupid. Please stand up in class and apologise.' 'You may be the most sexy creature on the planet Sallie but your attention to basic details is unbelievably crap. You have tried this before and I gave you a chance. You will be the next lesson.'

At the next lesson the thirty mixed teenagers were ready in their places when Freddie arrived. They settled down after Freddie literally handed out some high-fives for work well done. Nobody tried a high-five on Freddie who hadn't earned it – they nursed a very painful

wrist afterwards and the message spread. Sallie was already marked out as a sacrifice. She put on a brave face but Freddie picked her work apart in black-and-white terms asking Paulie, Leslie and Nickie if Sallie deserved to be in the class. "No" came back every time. He made her sit on the teacher's desk facing the class, head bowed, crying. Having done enough group-hate he took out his metaphorical love-hate knife and hovered around the hunched girl hiding her face.

"Look up Sallie! Let's all see your face. Let's all see your tears. There are no stones in this classroom. Ask us to love you or hate you. Leslie! Will you love Sallie if she asks?"

"I suppose so."

"Come on you can do better than that. My classes don't do maybe do we me hearties!" 'Me hearties' being Freddie's catch phrase it got the instant response he hoped for. "So you give Sallie a last chance? Sure?" He got the 'yes' he wanted. "Don't let them down dear. Come on let me dry those eyes with my hankie." Freddie looked at the class. "If Sallie lets me down again I might think she's an idiot..." he waited for the routine response of 'and we know what happens to idiots' "or I might think the whole class let her down. Don't let me down will you?" He got his 'No'. This was so much richer than any video game. This wasn't instant excitement but the widening of horizons on a never-ending ocean cruise.

Amongst all the prescribed essay subjects on loyalty and evils of dissent in the

Classics, Freddie had made it clear that he expected some modern-day mirrors. At the last lesson of the year Freddie admitted that the whole class had been subversive in their opinions of the State but not to worry as he would be the one to be arrested and shot. "They don't stone people like me – one bullet and a shroud of silence. Now listen my beauties..." He had never used 'beauties' before so this was an excitement and milestone for everyone. There was no doubt about Freddie's sincerity, after ten seconds anyone would know he was as sincere as a hungry shark. "Listen to me my beauties. Denise, Vaughan, Giles, Gillian – Hey Gillian you're wearing that lovely yellow dress with the Spanish sleeves! Just for me I hope... But if not then today, for the first time ever in my class, I'll let you have another true love and not me. Go on! I love your boy already!" For a moment the boy next to her thought he had a chance. Then she pointed at Freddie. "Gillian! You are the quiet one. You write sensibly like a drain carries rainwater but you're a wonderful person I could love forever. Come here and have a little whisper. He patted the space on his desk beside where he was sitting. She needed no encouragement to come forward and jump up. In a second they had arms over each other's shoulders and were smiling into each other's faces. In two seconds Freddie faced the class and said.

"This is the last lesson. The future needs princess and bridesmaids. Gillian shall be first bridesmaid. I have just been given – believe it or not – been given six thousand pounds to spend on a class

expedition. We could go to Hardy country or Wordsworth's lakes or Stevenson's Scotland but we can't go back to Shakespeare's world as a time machine hasn't been invented. Where shall we go boys and girls?" He finished with "Hands-up who want's to come with me to the future? You've all earned it."

Freddie had to have his own bed-body-for-a-week or else he would be a shark in a pool of steak. He found the courage to ask the school matron who was at least forty, but a happy, chubby blond, to accompany them. Sue believed him when he said he preferred an older woman. She was the teacher and he the pupil. Her husband had been posted to the war in Franconia two years ago, and he had a lot to learn. Together they were temporarily happy, while the boys and girls in their makeshift and confused accommodation fumbled themselves over the basic embarrassments in whispers. Innocence before modernity. They all swam together in green rivers, climbed trees, went for walks where getting from A to B was simple side-by-side boot-slogging, and were given tasks where getting back to base still a virgin was practically impossible. Just before the last night, Freddie insisted matron should pester the girls on his behalf to tell her their liaisons so they could be assured with 'Freddie approves – isn't it wonderful'. This was their last chance to pair. They's all heard the unofficial slogan *The state abhors a virgin*.

Shakespeare's Forest of Arden was place to escape from injustice and find love. Freddie knew they couldn't stay there in hiding. Before the expedition he let a few know they would have a Shakespearean experience. Word flew around. At the camp, struggling with trying to cook over primitive camp fires and finding out how to erect tents, they realised for themselves Jaques' cynical view of the idyll of forest life had a lot going for it. Four evenings were spent in every dry garment they had, even thought it was summer, playing with the ideas in the play. Everyone was chilly but nobody was bored in the evening class around the fire. Freddie finished the final session by thanking his ex-students (they didn't think of themselves as 'ex') for coming on this special extra level in the game of learning. "You've all seen dandelions. At school I hope I brought you to flower. I've seen your papers and I know you'll all get good results. But the yellow of a dandelion isn't the end of the story is it? What's next?"

"Pollination." said Margery.

"Then what happens?"

"It turns into a puff ball of seeds."

Freddie said "So that's sex and spreading it around in a beautiful way. You know that's what the state wants. Boys and girls being patriotic. We're in the forest now but outside it's unfair and unjust. I know and I don't want any of you to learn the hard way."

The unmistakable weary voice of Eustace said "Weeds! Dandelions are weeds!

Stop them seeding if you can. Dig out their taproot with a chisel-stick."

"You are our Jaques today Eustace. I'm really proud of you – you cynic. I happen to like dandelions and blowing on their fairy seed heads. There's something mystical about sending those dandelion children into the world. But I too am a cynic. What am I doing with children this minute?"

Leila said "I don't want to be blown into the world. I'm not ready."

Freddie said "Get sexed or what use are you in the world?"

Discussion continued until midnight when the effects of Freddie's smuggled alcohol, Shakespearean romance, nature and recognising the necessity of being paired turned the dandelion of discussion into shared sleeping bags.

On the reserved carriage back to Colchester, Freddie insisted on taking it in turns to having the middle seat between coupled-teenagers. "Good luck guys. You know what love is now. Love is something everyone tries to paint in colours then suddenly it dries to hate. It happens! I know you don't believe me but it can. Between me and a class of the two bodies present – shall we say if love becomes suck-it then you'll tell me? I won't do anything about it simply because you will have failed me, but I *will* do something about it. I hate to see my loves – you are my loves – unhappy. Please don't make me unhappy.

Then there were the social mis-fit leftovers. Matron had already been dispatched to see if they could be socialised. There were five out of thirty six. Eustace was a special case. Freddie led the other four unsuspecting into the mortuary and matron signed the euthanasia warrants.

Freddie really liked Sue. She was competent in everything. Not quite old enough to be his mother. Saucy one minute with Freddie then strict to deal efficiently with whatever needed doing or Freddie needed to do. A teddy bear to hug that gave orders. Every order a demand to be debated by his inner self then approved with shame for the inner-Freddie by his loving-self. They had made love with gusto, and the fact that Sue had a husband who was away on the front-line made it more satisfying for both of them. They were both enjoying a new life out of school. He asked her nicely and listened to her answers while she showed him things you don't see in video games, teased him, ironed his shirts and made him do the vacuuming in a pinny. No more shirts with worn collars for him! She was 'home'.

They even went to the theatre together. Some unknown benefactor had made Freddie a member of the *Underground Theatre* in London. He realised it was a pen where noisy people were put to control them in one place but so what? Just his type. Along with the rest of the audience they talked through the foreign-language plays, cheered at the slightest hint of subversion and booed

the establishment stooges in English plays.

A tiny lady in a khaki business suit, long black hair and an Arts Council accent asked Freddie if he wrote anything and would he like to write something, a play perhaps, for State Day. The theme of State Day this year was 'Obedience'. Nothing much, roughly an hour. Two 'Dahlings' later she was on the other side of the room leaving Freddie in no doubt this was an order, challenging him to show his true colours. He should try even if he later said mice ate his homework. Sue fell on him in his indecision. "Of course you must. It's a test. You know what happened the last time you were disobedient to me?"

"Yes dear. You were a pantomime baddie. Tease me to shreds in bed but this is serious writing. I have to be alone." With five weeks before school restarted after the summer break, Freddie could sit in the peace of his flat all morning before having to report progress to Sue at two o'clock. He was supposed to have eaten lunch and to bring today's work with him. The routine was good. Once the initial fumbblings were over he went at it with enthusiasm, even going to bed late and getting up early to carve a bit more. So far he was writing two, an obedience themed single act play for Sue and also a full play set in ancient Greece for a wider audience. As he wrote and saw how people trapped themselves, he felt like a god looking down on the well-meaning folly of the humans. Sue's play started with the civilised convenience of cooperation followed by pleasure of

obedience and trust on both sides, then dependency and uncertainty and lack of independent thought leading to stupidities. There were two characters, some sort of lovers or mother and child-husband, he hadn't quite got the roles fixed, he was leaning towards witch and magic cat but that had evil context which he didn't want. The Greek play was easier to write, but to begin with new characters kept appearing. When the theme of when and why to trust a leader and when and why to not trust them and when and why to depose them became clear he managed to cut out the walk-on parts. Personal rivalries between generals came from personal ambition, but at some stage the one we don't like and has been exiled is shown to be right and now he's asked to lead the revolution, except he says 'you betrayed me before so why should I do as you ask now?' Bribes are nice and help pay for an army but firstly he knows his rival is not really all that useless, and secondly he has to be loyal to something. Eventually the priests get to him but... It was about at point that the mates he described it to would stop him and ask about the action? The first time this confused Freddie. A typical conversation went.

"It's a play not a first-person shooter."

"You've got to have action Freddie. How about a duel between the two main characters to start with?"

"No it's a different age."

"You could make it strategy. You know – each financing an army then raiding to

get more land and money and have raids against each other building up to a giant war.

"No. They're wondering what to do and why. Not hurling a discus or fighting in chariots every few seconds."

"Nobody will understand it. I know I'm not one of the Underground Intellectuals but I can't see the point."

"The point is they're taking responsibility for their actions."

"Sitting around debating isn't very exciting is it."

"It's important. One man's honourable actions is another man's treachery."

Sue suggested he should recruit some of his students and see what they came up with. She didn't tell him and he didn't obey but the way they worked together in a crisis validated his secret 'Play for Sue' as he was calling it. Perhaps the play for the Underground Theatre should be something like the obedience of children who overtake and then overshadow their slower parents. Perhaps both would be presented as first and second half. As a matter of survival he pestered the director who had been assigned to produce his work to get clues for how much Anti-State sentiment was allowed. As he didn't get much response he decided to use people he could rely on to invent conundrums: His pupils.

A few blasts on socmed with a time, venue and promise of interesting work and a

good time with Freddie drew over twenty curious teenagers. In the upstairs room of the old Rose and Crown at Lexden, he sat on the sofa with feet on the table, one arm round Gillian's shoulder and another on Denise's he outlined his new plan and how he'd been tumbled into it. "Guys will five of you write the play for the rest to act? Girls will you do the same? Make this one count. This your chance to be bad boys and girls – the sort of bad of me and matron who break the weaklings. One day we'll be strong enough to tell the establishment they have to make way for the fists and boots of youth. Kelly you'll make a great heroine stalking men in a black leotard. Brian you'll make a great enthusiast who has his confidence undermined. Tommy you'll make a good everyday person with hidden complexities that could develop. Sallie I still don't know if you can be the same person from one week to the next, let alone act. The next week is all an act. Good practice and you will be a little bit famous if we get it right but good fun as well. I've saved a bit of money from our camping trip." He stood up and walked over to the dartboard then turned so his face was directly in front of it. "This is all magic. That's what drama is. Don't let me down. Everyone in this room will do something even if it's only to learn not to get involved in arguments. Get in your groups now. I don't care if it is one writer and ten dumb actors but I haven't been asked to do this by a dummy – somebody is pulling strings. If we get something worth showing then I promise you'll get a chance to show it on TV." There was a cautious rearrangement of

bodies. He held his hands open wide. "This is an opportunity. We've blagged the money and we'll blag more. Just decide in the next ten minutes who wants to be a writer and who an actor and who both." The 'neither' option was tacitly denied. "Oh and one more thing. Find out if lots of chanting on stage is more effective than lots of whispering." With that after-thought came a determination to depose the official directors, preferably in public in the theatre of disgrace HEY! what a great idea! *Theatre of disgrace.*

Freddie went to the girl's writing group of eight, hunched over two tables pushed together, each with notebook ready. "You can have boys in your play. But first write and write and get fed-up and argue, then in forty-eight hours time tell me your arguments. If we have to have two or four separate plays then we can do that. It's supposed to be obedience but you don't need me to tell you the best way to show that do you?" He went to the boys sitting around chatting trying to find a plan. "You need one solid theme boys. You have studied Shakespeare. What is obedience and why does it matter? In forty-eight hours I want an outline you can all agree with. If you need girls then use boys in skirts for now."

Freddie explained where he was leading to Sue. Sue calmed him. Freddie vowed obedience to Sue in his mind. Then he lunged at her with a plea for whipping him to be brave for all of them when his video-game legend faded. Sue was satisfied. She was understanding too. If anyone could keep them safe it was Freddie. "You've got a school legend now

Freddiefool." That was her new pet name for him. "But what about me? I love David even if he's stuck in the trenches of Franconia. I can't kick him in the crutch."

"I'm sorry Sue I don't know what you should do. What you decide I can live with. You're the Julia in my life – I'm the obedient people thanking you for steady leadership and looking after all of us. My play for you is a goddess tempting a shepherd on a Greek hillside and then the shepherd gets fed-up and she has to find ways to chase him or slow his escape or make a chance encounter without being suspected of being in love with a mortal by the other goddesses. Well I'm not getting fed up and I'm not chasing either. We're past that stage aren't we?"

"Our lives are more complicated than the Greek legends Freddie."

"Please don't let me down Sue. We can part if we must but I'll never hate you. You saved me from savage sex amongst the minnows of the sixth form. I love you too. I'm not really me, just the wishes of all my followers. Fill me with hope and confidence. My legend has brutal power but you sort of give me a vision of something better."

"You led those four to the mortuary and I signed their death warrants as losers. I don't think we should have done that Freddie."

"Necessity. The State knows I sacrifice my loves for productivity. I'll never do it again. When you're the State Caretaker and I've been executed, promise you'll

remember their names and erect a stone to my crime."

"I've forgotten their names already Freddiefool."

"Tim, Pug, Jo and Leila. I won't forget. They didn't suffer but they never grew to help us. They must help us by being why we burrow under the foundations of the State. I don't mind dying for that but you must live and command."

After Sue's fierce campaign on Freddie not to let their work drain away like water in the sand, careful use of socmed combined with preparation had Freddie's dramatists showcased on TerraTV's *Twenty-four seconds* news as East Anglia's turn to lead State Day celebrations with fresh play-writing by enthusiastic sixth-formers. The next morning the Rose and Crown was under siege by the media grasping for naive straws. Freddie had prepared his troops for this and they appeared in groups of three or four. All in worn jeans and sandals or flip-flops carrying a businesslike black bag. All of them topless in the morning August sun. The girls as well. This was war! The camera flashes stuttered continuously as they arrived. Freddie arrived a little later wearing shorts, loose shirt and a white cap from under which his crinkled face smiled. Attacked by a couple of dozen reporters wielding microphones and cameras he held up his empty hands. "What's going on?" After being asked lots of questions at once he picked on one of the reporters. "What's your question. The rest of you shut up."

"Mister Reynolds is this your plot?"

"Is what my plot?"

"Subversive plays for Obedience Day?"

"I'm a teacher. I teach drama. When we have Subversive day I will encourage obedience. When we have 'Up day' I will drive them to 'down'."

"Why Mister Reynolds?" came at least three instant responses.

"We're in England. We have English. That's what it's for. Nearly seven hundred years of Chaucer and you don't know that? You must be slow. Has it made our country stronger and stronger and stronger? Yes of course. English is a thousand ways to say we want, we need, we despise, we defy. That's our heritage. Now I must get on and stop the youngsters being silly." The reporters refused to give up with this dismissal and crowded round Freddie. He fumbled in the tight pocket of his tattered denim shorts and pulled out a large bullet. Without looking up he said "Anyone who wants one of these to the head should stay here. The rest of you get three metres back and let me through. He pointed up. They saw a tall bare-breasted girl with long black hair streaming over her shoulders from under a camouflage cap with a cheerful smile leaning against the open window of the 16th century pub. Jake was beside her out of sight holding a long green canvas bag with the stock of a gun ready for her to reach for. He was sweating. Nicola was a pretty picture. Freddie tried to shoo the reporters back. Two idiots took their chance.

After the shots and carnage Nicola grabbed a cammo jacket, took the gun back from Jake, kissed him then ran out of the rear fire escape. In twenty seconds she'd used a 4x4 pickup as a trampoline to get over the back wall and into a maze of tiny alleys and gardens. Four burly paramedics wearing goggles dragged the bodies to an ambulance which, as people realised later, was rather an odd thing to do with corpses. A stage village bobby complete with old fashioned pointed helmet arrived. He picked somebody.

"Did I hear some shots?"

"No constable." said the stooge.

"Oh. That's alright then." This blatant cover-up set the tone for 'just another killing so best not even make eye contact' dispersal.

Jake was shaking while boasting of his part in the action and how the bods were popped so realistically just as in a game. There was secret envy amongst the others. Freddie had been closer to the skull-explodings. He had bits of brains and tiny shards scratchy bone on his bare legs and arms. As Sue helped him wash off the horrible stains she said "They deserved it."

"No they didn't! They were idiots but idiots don't deserve death."

"At least they didn't suffer Fool."

"But I did. I will suffer. The world will say the idiots deserved it but I'm an idiot really. I suffer for them."

"Nonsense Freddie. Pull yourself together. This is about power not politeness. You must kill or be killed."

"We're all going to be wiped out Sue."

"You better not let it happen Freddiefool or I'll never speak to you again."

No bodies appeared on *Twenty-four seconds news* that night even though practically everyone in the country and many around the world had an avalanche of mostly accurate socmed news, the official channel found declining numbers of eels in Somerset more important. This caused a socmed backlash against the TV which then struggled with bluffs about unspecified 'investigations'. Freddie had taken the challenge and got away with it. There were no arrests, denunciations, or protests. There couldn't be many more levels to go. Although he could speculate, he still didn't know who was watching over his shoulder playing him. Nicola had shown the nation what obedience meant. Horrible. Now they had to finish the alternative and show it to the Nation.

By the next day the boys had a play where they worshipped a statue then the statue began to crumble and they had to decide when the statue was no longer something to follow. The girls had four statues who engaged two boys and two girls to get them as followers and then reacted as the followers crumbled under pressure. Nicola wanted every costume to have a target on in. Jake had already

started making variously sized targets. Freddie was frightened. Sue drove him to the next level. He pestered *Twenty-four seconds* to get Arts-Council lady to attend two run-throughs. When this had been agreed he additionally demanded it be done at the National Theatre rehearsal space with oversight of professionals. So an open-top double-decker bus with balloons and ribbons from Colchester went to London with a completely irrelevant trip down the Mall. On board there was Freddie, waving sheaves of paper, his 'followers', the head teacher and deputy head (and his wife who suspected him of using it as an excuse to get out of her sight), Matron who could be relied to see everyone ended up in the right bed and five deferential reporters who were very polite to Nicola.

OBEY ME

Her orange tee-shirt with OBEY ME stencilled on it in black was pretty uncompromising. Jake had a similar tee-shirt with the words OBEY HER. Jake wasn't the fastest wit in the class but he knew not to spoil the exquisite ambiguity between Nicola and Julia by giving an answer to who 'HER' was. By now practically all of Freddie's top class had joined-in, and were fizzing with alternative meanings and discovering same-but-different irony and shocks to

reveal. The strange thing was that Julia always appeared on the media to appeal to the Nation's spirit of generosity to help her guide the nation through the latest crisis. She never demanded obedience directly beyond the basics of turning-in traitors and terrorists. Tonight's play at the National Theatre was Julius Caesar.

After the free-loading school officials had been diverted to a phoney reception, media interviews and lunch, everyone else learned a lot. The professional actors and technicians were cautious at first but then news came that the Culture Minister in her Laurel-green version of Elizabeth the First's portrait, complete with little ruff and pale face had arrived. She probably thought she was at the Globe down the road. What an awful dress and a mouth for worms to crawl out of! More than one mind saw her being savaged on stage. She posed for the cameras outside where the words 'National Theatre of England' could be clearly seen but didn't actually look-in on the gradually warming oven of creativity. At the lunch break the news filtered through almost as an irrelevance that she'd appeared on *Sound-bites-at-one* saying how important and inspirational the arts were to England.

The morning had inspired Freddie's followers and made the professionals think. One clever change was to have the boy's statue melt rather than crumble. It would be so much easier from a technical

point of view with wax under carefully controlled lights. It was a new experience for everyone. The professionals were reminded of their youth, energy and freedom to dream before they joined the ranks of the State Theatre. After the tattered lunch break some famous names appeared lusting after the possibilities of making Nicola a goddess for the boys. There was no doubt that she was a calm pretty face with a nice body. Pliant but fierce. Lots of people looked at her OBEY. Such a sexy combination and those long black pigtailed making her look younger than a tall woman of eighteen and three months. But nobody needed reminding that this wasn't the sort of thing to put in writing now. They understood the dynamics of fear like every other citizen and a crack of bravery was a spider's-silk thread of hope to catch. But by being nice they could see that there was a way to being accepted. She sat relaxed watching, to be brought-on as a tiger or tigress as required. From the point of view of most of the professionals she wasn't a very good statue to use as she would think logically about what was being said and worse, implied, then react by giving a lecture starting with the mime of unslinging a gun. The theatre director took her aside and explained that while what she said made sense, it was supposed to be for an intelligent theatre audience to hear unspoken thoughts for themselves. When she complained that words mattered to her and she couldn't stand there mute, the Director replied that they were writing about the people interacting with the statues not the statues themselves. For example one

might be scared and another dismissive of what they think the statue has told them.

Sue made sure she knew enough about the professionals and their methods which seemed quite fierce in a think the unthinkable, do the unacceptable way. "It's getting out of hand Freddie."

"No it isn't. This is where the revolution starts. Our kids and their mates and the secret haters of the Establishment and their mates will come together in the next few days. Keep that to yourself Sue. We've been allowed to get away with murder. For a reason. We've been shown how to jump to the next level. Who gave me membership of the Underground Theatre? Who thought I might write a play? I can't believe shooting the reporters at the Rose and Crown was in their script but there were no negative repercussions and now we're at this stage. I think Julia is lonely. I'm tired. This is so nice. Later we'll be sociable and I'll get every kid-pair adopted by a professional. Freddie's rule was no socmed in class but the professionals were constantly turning away to talk.

Film producer Alfred Badcock introduced himself to Freddie as he sat in the next chair in the gloomy rear of one of the rehearsal spaces. "I'm going to make a film of you Freddie. But first I'm going to make a star of Nicola the girl with the gun. She's got punch. You're like a summer breeze bringing us good things

but she's like a big bill through the letter box."

Freddie was still leaning back with eyes closed. "What about the others Mister Badcock?"

Alfred dropped his voice from casual to secret. "You and them. We all are together but the brave ones get executed and we can't get anywhere."

"Better start making your film about me quickly then."

"Perhaps you've found the way Freddie? What happens if we put your plays on live TV?"

"Nothing of course. Everyone is upset but what can they do. Cry in their beer?"

"You said if the official subject was obedience you'd teach subversion but I have another suggestion."

Freddie sat up and opened his eyes. "Go on Mister Badcock."

"Obedience to something else. You perhaps. Nicola perhaps."

"Bloody hell Mister Badcock. You've just drowned my ambition. Five seconds and my hopes for pushing over the house of cards that is the Establishment have been destroyed."

"Why?"

"Because you have a violent vindictive vision. The shooters and the shot. That's not my aim. Go away and play your nasty films on other people."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"Yes you did. What role for Nicola in a free society?"

"There's no such thing as a free society"

"Yes there is. Believe it. Believe in me. Help me make it happen. Now get back up there. I'm relying on you Mister Badcock. Don't let me down."

"I don't know what to do."

"Yes you do. Of course you do, you've made six big films. They have more bullets than us so it's up to you to lead us into hearts then to ten minutes of slaughter. Our lives are not days of slaughter but preparation for one hour of it. Now go!"

Half an hour later Lawson the theatre director burst in on a calm Freddie talking to a reporter over a coffee. "The Code Squad have arrived!"

"Who?"

"They check the scripts."

"Oh you mean for political correctness?"

"Yes."

"Thanks for the tip-off Simon." Freddie was alert. "We've got to get them a front row seat... Can we use the main stage?" The director nodded. "Get some scriptwriters or people pretending to be scriptwriters to delay them. Go! I'll see you on stage in a minute." Freddie turned to his reporter guest. "You make sure the media are ready for a conflict. Get these guys in the spotlight of light and innocent questions. They'll probably

die in their chairs but don't tell anyone I said so because they may be innocent."

"Ha! Innocent bastards from the Ministry of Culture. I'll believe it when I see it."

"Shsh! Go! Make them important. Keep tripping them up."

Freddie collected everyone on the main stage. The steps leading to the Senate were a convenient focal point. "Put four chairs so they're well placed to see action on these steps. We're going to batter and defeat them."

In the foyer a steady stream of people were being introduced to two women in silk scarves and long artistic dresses covering their ankles in screen-printed cotton, and two men who appeared to be neck-less Chicago-bulldogs in suits. All four had pistol holsters on military style belts and wore Ministry of Culture badges with their c-in-a-circle logo. After five minutes Freddie appeared. He'd had more than enough experience of insolent pupils to be able to deal with this. He picked the tallest man. "Pleased to meet you." Freddie held out his hand for a shake. The dog's hesitation was obvious. When shaking hands Freddie said "What's your name?"

Another hesitation. "James"

"Is that Mister James or James somebody?"

"Er. Mister James."

"Are you going to be on first name terms with me?"

"I'd rather not Mister Reynolds."

"As you wish. If that's your attitude then depart." There was a long silence. Nobody moved.

He said "We've come to inspect your script."

"Wonderful. We don't want any faults with our script. Now give me your first name or depart." While the frozen conflict of ooze under the arc lights developed Freddie cupped the chin of one of the ladies, smiled and said "I'll get to know you better later. You look like a saucy bit of stuff." It appeared nobody had an answer to this outrage. The woman stared back but they were used to acceptance of authority and automatic obedience so now they didn't know the rules. Clearly they didn't have a leader who was a leader. "Now if I'm to introduce you to all the lovely people from Colchester who are just starting out on a creative and I hope subversive life then I demand your first names. How about you dear?" He did everything except touch her again.

One of the dogs said "You don't understand Mister Reynolds/"

/"Call me Freddie."

"Er We have the power to inspect your script. It's the law."

"Jolly good. We'll see you in court. That would make a great play don't you think?" He looked directly at the silent dog. "Your honour these nameless twits

who haven't told me their qualifications to judge literature turn up so what am I supposed to do? You see. I have twenty four youngsters in my charge. These could be Harrises and Savilles for all I know." How much longer would he need to keep up this attack...

Eustace barged in from behind the culture-police. He had a roll-up fag drooping from the corner of his mouth! The women sprang back in disgust. "Sorry Mister Fred but the guvno'r he say it's OK to lead the lambs to the slaughter."

"Thank you Eustace. Please lead them through to the scriptorium." Freddie hoped Eustace would guess what to do even if scriptorium was yet another unknown word. They went to their slaughter trying to keep their dignity, hoping that their badges and pistols would work against the peasants of Colchester.

Sue fell on Freddie with a kiss. "You can't let Eustace smoke!"

"You deal with it dear. I've got a trap that mustn't be sprung. I need these guys out of here alive."

Freddie had done lots of drama at school and university where his parts were small and precise, while his real role was to be like the donkey they put in the lorry with race-horses to calm them down. He knew there were cameras watching and microphones listening. Looking for a crack he asked the reporters why the Culture Minister had turned up that morning but she hadn't come inside to meet everyone? He admitted frankly that he didn't know so best they asked her.

The reporters followed him like smells cling to a toilet. He must learn to use them.

They all followed the gang of four onto the stage of Julius Caesar. This was going to be tonight's play to which Colchester mischief makers had been invited to watch from behind the scenes. There were hours before the audience arrived and the curtains were open onto a dark void of the auditorium. Four plain chairs were placed in a line facing towards the Senate steps. Once they'd been seated, Lawson the director of tonight's, play made a little speech. "Ladies and gentlemen of the famous Roman town of Camulodunum." He paused then turned to the four stooges. "That's the Roman name for Colchester." "These two ladies and two gentlemen are from the Ministry of Culture. They want to vet your scripts. We don't know why and what they're looking for but perhaps they can tell us.

Without half a second's delay Jake started "Are you paid?"

One of the women answered "Yes of course."

"How much extra do you want to go away?"

Nicola said "How much will you pay us to let you go away?"

One of the dogs stood-up, hand on holster. "Enough games. We're entitled to see your scripts. Bring them here now or you'll all be arrested."

Freddie intervened. "We'll do better and show you some highlights then tell us what you think. We have a statue of Julia to throw stones at. You see at this point the crowd is being obedient to other statues. What would be best do you think? Pebbles, stones, mud, soft squishy fruit?"

"None! It's not permitted to insult Julia like that. No way at all."

"Oh dear then you'll have to arrest us all when it happens. Make sure you bring your paperwork. In the meantime..." Eustace, still with his crumpled roll-up, wandered in from out of the dusky wings pushing a wide broom. He stopped when he realised he had strayed into the light. He looked around, shrugged, took the disgusting fag out of his mouth looked at it, threw it on the floor then began sweeping it away into the wings where he came from. "In the meantime Julius Caesar, one of Shakespeare's finest works..." Freddie sat down on the Forum steps facing the gang of four and used his hands to embrace them from a distance "... is everything about killing leaders. Why is that allowed but not a few stones at a statue? It even shows you that killing a leader might be morally justifiable with Brutus being a bit of a hero for keeping true to the good of the state."

One of the dogs said "It's classical so nobody thinks of it as having anything to do with reality. Books aren't popular culture for the masses any more. Only a few intellectuals even see Shakespeare."

One of the women said "That sort of thing is safe in the minds of educated people who understand the risks."

Freddie stood up and shook his head, holding it with both hands as if they could squeeze unwanted ideas out. "This is political correctness gone mad." He writhed in conflict. "You do understand that the play is about the nobles killing nobles don't you?" A camera-man crept close and crouched for a shot of his face. Then various shapes in the shadows were explained as belonging to more camera operators. "This isn't the mob causing a riot. This isn't the gods at play Let's watch those moments shall we?"

There followed the professional actors cornering Caesar, hesitating then stabbing in the neck and the follow-through. Caesar got up from his tangle of roman robes, sat on the steps with his head in his hands. "How could I have been so stupid? My trusted friends. A dagger point in the back of the neck is horrible..." He raised his head and stared directly at the audience of four. "Look behind you!"

Eustace with his broom had been a deliberate distraction to allow Jake and three of the National Theatre staff to take positions kneeling behind the audience of four. Now they were standing up with ordinary kitchen forks ready to kill. Dramatic power of a stab by a fiend! After ten seconds of shock and calculation there was no doubt who could be killers and killed. Eustace clanked back onto the stage with a bucket and

mop ready to use. "Bloody toffs! Bleeding toffs! Eustace will clean up after you. Eustace doesn't mind of course he doesn't." He handed the mop and bucket to Caesar then slouched off followed by the would-be fork-assassins stroking their weapons looking round with nightmare grins of 'next-time'.

Freddie said "Why not bring Julia and the Minister for Culture to see the whole play tonight? Why was the Minister so careful not to know anything about what we were doing today? Julia must suspect her so a safe play like Julius Caesar will be perfect for such intellectuals to deal with their trust issues. Now the same play again. Watch carefully!"

This time Caesar was a woman who looked a bit like Julia. It was Sue with Julia's trademark chestnut hair. Brutus was a girl who had the pinched face and green dress similar to the Minister for Culture. The others had paper masks and in their Roman robes could be boys or girls. Eustace came in and leant on his mop waiting for the mess. Instead of a dagger at the striking moment Sue stood back with hands in the air, automatic-fire ripped the silence and her head exploded. (It was a bag of rice, cornstarch and colouring smacked onto her head by a stage hand but it was real in that it went everywhere and if there are only four in the audience within five metres then they're bound to get some of the brains.) The Gang of four tried to get up but they had a second set of un-noticed and unwanted minders who put their left hands on the left shoulders. A tannoy message blared "Stay seated for your own

safety." Freddie and the National Theatre actors still in costume appeared from the rear of the forum, walked down to the steps, past the stunned audience to the edge of the void. Cameras followed them at the crouch-and-run to get the side shot.

A trained actors voice boomed "Hence! home, you idle creatures get you home." The hands on their shoulders became under the armpit encouragements. As they were being shown the way out of this stretched nightmare to normal life they were allowed to watch...

The director faced the black void of the auditorium. "Do you understand the game we play?"

From the middle of a now empty stage Eustace said "Not until today."

Badcock waved at Freddie

*Friends, enemies, countrymen, lend me
your ears;
I come to bury hate, not to praise it.
The evil that women do hides from us;
The good is oft inferred by fear or threats;
For Eustace is an honourable man;
So are they all, all honourable men.*

This was all that could be arranged in five hectic minutes and was anyway an experiment. Badcock knew this could be refilmed again and he knew how to get his material and himself out of the country. For him this was a war-zone.

Flashes and cheers came from the dark auditorium.

As soon as the gang of four had been shown to the street and handed their own personal bag of mock-brains as a parting gift, Freddie, Badcock and Lawson convened a council of war with their supporters and an ever-growing press corps. They sat in a windowless room with bare white walls and black ceiling festooned with a plethora of pipes and ducts.

Freddie started "Well done everyone. Thanks to the National and I bloody well hope you get your video abroad Alfie because as of now we are the targets and others are targeting us. Mind that well Jake! You did brilliantly. Eustace! Why didn't you tell me you were a genius actor! You're a disgusting slut with that fag... But I forgive you as an artistic necessity. Many would want to give you a month in jug but I say you showed us why we need to give smokers a month in chokey. It was really disgusting. What do you reckon Lawson?"

"We've got a mascot and a seat-filler with Eustace after this afternoon."

"How do you feel about that Eustace? Being the face that welcomes thousands to the most important theatre in England?"

"I'll give it a try sir."

"I think you've found the best classroom ever Eustace."

"OK then sir. What do I have to do?"

"Nothing. None of us have to do anything."

A reporter stood up. A dozen photographers stood up. "Mister Eustace how old are you?"

"Oh I know this one mister reporter. I'm as old as the old woman I feel."

He looked at Freddie. Freddie gave him thumbs-up with both hands trying not to get confused by the happiness and perfection of Eustace's mad-lib making the script of English history. Freddie said to the whole company as he walked over to Eustace still in his brown storeman's coat. "There's nothing more important than applauding good acting... And there's nothing more important than looking after our brothers and sisters."

Sallie shouted to the reporters "He made us all help Eustace."

Freddie said "I'm not a saint."

A "You did!" from Sallie was agreed with by the rest of Colchester trouble-makers.

Freddie made a frown and put his knuckles on his hips. "Make a video-game out of that! Now onwards! Is this good education?" There was three or four seconds of absolute silence. Freddie said. "Shit shit shittty shit! Of course it fucking-well is. Who is afraid to say that? Put your hands up if you're afraid to say that?" No hands went up. "So lets see your hands up in the air for this is good education." Lots of hands went up. The air was filled with camera flashes. "So I'm the person who isn't afraid to say what you're afraid to think. Is that right? Everyone is afraid but cowardice is running away from what must be faced no matter what. Oh by the way - Thank

you to the technicians from the National who made those brains burst and did the make up and lighting at zero minutes notice. Everyone here is skilled and makes the effort. Have you thought that Julia is alone and surrounded by incompetents? We have to let you get on and make a play but socmed will make this a night to remember. My guys! You need to eat! Leave the alcohol until after the show. We won't get home until after it gets light tomorrow."

Jake asked "Please sir why didn't you have the script-police killed?"

"Why do you think?"

"Please sir I don't know."

"For an extremely very superlative reason. I'll tell you tomorrow. You're old enough to think for yourselves now."

Freddie, Eustace, director Lawson and Badcock with his Remora of a cameraman, collected themselves together before the play. Freddie, Lawson and Badcock knew this was going to be a milestone in drama. Eustace was their lucky mascot. Freddie had suggested Eustace and Lawson should be buddies. If the show ended normally then the honoured guests must be honoured and not threatened. They'd done threats already and Julia had bravely, note bravely, and probably with a purpose unless she was a drugged puppet, decided to face the threat of stone-throwing sixth-formers. So ambassadors of calm would be needed. Anyone else could do what they liked but there wasn't to be the slightest threat or

alarm. "We've done all that. Now we're citizens – humans even – being nice to each other."

Lawson said "We could get your students out the back in a scenery van when nobody was looking Freddie. Keep them safe."

"Where would they go?"

"Our survival depends on telling Julia we have big big worries but would never be assassins unless the need arose. You might assassinate somebody but who goes in their place? Where is Julius Caesar part two?"

Caused by the natural ebb and flow of greedy reporters, coupled with extra security precautions there was a hurried shambles of a meal of crew and some Colchester students and another of actors and the other Colchester students. The students were on a dream holiday. The theatre staff were well aware that tonight would be different. Big-wigs and front-of house staff would have to shift for themselves. The National Theatre had already seen drama once today and how useful the kids from Colchester could be. Now they all realised, without any escape, they were on the same stage, actors and crew alike. This was first-night adrenaline. Tonight would be a great night in the theatre. Anyone in a class of Freddie's would punch their way to the future. A dozen queer hints connected like a jigsaw to make a battleship-broadside of drama. The students couldn't help notice the limits to helpfulness from the professionals

holding onto their jobs and then how they softened and warmed to an opportunity that might never be repeated.

Nicola and Jake had been told in the strongest terms that now they were to be ambassadors of friendship. They were dressed and made-up by the wardrobe department as Romans with, lashed-up wigs, jewellery and even sandals. Their job tonight was to be ready to accompany Julia in the State Caretaker's Box and if necessary explain the finer points of the play in the gentlest terms they knew and answer questions she might have about Colchester and Freddie and this afternoon's events. Jake asked again to be told why the four state servants were spared and again he was told to think it out for himself.

"But she might ask!"

"Yes. That's a possibility. I don't like men behind a gun who aren't brave. You're going to find out what it's like. You may be killed tonight. I bloody well hope not because it will be a waste but this isn't a game. Eustace has done his bit and now you will try not to sweat and shake. Good luck."

After delays caused by dozens of state security men asking questions, poking everywhere and getting in the way, the curtain rose to an empty square in Rome

TWO STAGEHANDS (EUSTACE AND LAWSON) IN
STOREMEN'S COATS LEAN ON THEIR BROOMS.

BOTH ARE SMOKING! EUSTACE INSPECTS HIS SHRIVELLED ROLL-UP. LAWSON PUFFS-OUT CLOUDS FROM A PROPER CIGARETTE.

EUSTACE: Where'd get them posh cigs?

LAWSON: A friend.

EUSTACE: Let me have a puff.

LAWSON: I'm not sure. You being young an all that.

EUSTACE: Go on. Please. What's the harm of one puff.

LAWSON: LOOKS AROUND TO MAKE SURE NOBODY CAN SEE THEM.

Ok. Quick.

EUSTACE: EUSTACE FEELS IT THEN SUCKS AS DEEP AS HE CAN BEFORE HAVING TO EXHALE IN A HURRY WITH A COUGH. HANDS CIGARETTE BACK.

You're a gent mate. Here! Did you know there's gonna be a murder right here tonight? Just between us mates like?

LAWSON: No? Really? Who told you?

NOISES OF ROMANS PEOPLE APPROACHING. E AND L REACT BY CHUCKING THEIR FAGS ON THE FLOOR AND SWEEPING THEM OFF TO OPPOSITE SIDES.

Rumours went round the back and everyone could see the State Box full of pale faces behind the armoured glass reflecting the stage lighting. At the interval Julia stood up in the box and clapped generously. It had been a heart-felt performance running nearly five minutes slower than normal. Everyone in the building knew this was a pivot point in power. Some left early in case there was trouble but most were enthusiasts for political intrigue. According to one rumour the Culture Minister had been sacked. That was full of possibilities and prejudices. Another was smoking was going to be allowed again. That met with general disgust. Nobody seriously expected an assassination attempt... but wasn't it the unexpected that was likely to succeed. Most people wanted to have somebody else kill Julia for personal, ideological or anti-Establishment reasons. Three of the audience imagined they were brave enough and angry enough to do the deed themselves. (Profiling had revealed to those who monitored that sort of thing that of the two they knew about one was brave in her own bedroom and the other

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