

GENERATION F

WINSTON SMITH

Monday Books

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Dedication

I would like to thank my family and friends for their continued support through hard times and good times alike.

I'm also grateful to the judges of the Orwell Prize for Blogging for recognising me with their award in 2010.

Foreword

Liam often assaults staff. He spits, punches, regularly smashes up the house and cars outside. I can take care of myself, but he's a big lad and at times like tonight, with that vacant, angry look in his eye, he's very dangerous, very scary. As I stand there, weighing my options, Edwin and the pregnant Becky come out of their rooms and start pleading with him to turn his stereo off. Instead, he turns it louder. Myself and the other staff spend another 20 minutes talking to him, cajoling and encouraging him to 'make the right choice' and praising him for the few hours during the week when he wasn't causing mayhem. None of this is working; it rarely does.

Edwin and Becky are now losing their tempers. The pleading of earlier turns to threats and insults. Suddenly, Edwin rushes at Liam and hurls a 4kg dumbbell. Liam ducks. I know that when he stands up there's going to be serious trouble. Edwin runs back to his room and locks the door, taking Becky and the two female members of staff. Liam, apoplectic with fury, charges after them and starts kicking the door, maniacally.

There's not much I can do to stop him. As calmly as I can, I ask him please to stop trying to break the door down – always with nice manners, of course, it's good for their self esteem.

'Fuck off,' he snarls, 'or you're going to get it!'

'There's a pregnant girl in there, Liam,' I say. 'She's terrified... listen to her crying.'

He doesn't even hear me. 'I'm gonna mash you up, Edwin!' he yells, eyes bulging, spittle flying from his mouth. 'I'm gonna shank you, blud! I'm gonna mess you right up!'

'I'm gonna mash you up,' comes the muffled reply from Edwin, safe for now behind his locked door.

Liam races off and returns with a frying pan: I don't think he's planning make Edwin an omelette with it. Over all the banging and screaming and crying, I hear the phone ringing in the office along the corridor. I run to pick it up. 'Winston?' says the voice. 'It's Louise.'

'Louise?' I say, momentarily confused. 'Louise who?'

'Louise-stuck-inside-Edwin's-room,' she says, practically sobbing. 'I'm ringing on his phone but I can't get an outside line. Can you call the police? I'm really scared. He's nearly got the door off its hinges.'

A BRIGHT COLD DAY IN JANUARY

IT IS A BRIGHT COLD DAY in January, and the clocks will soon be striking nine.

I am walking along a dank, grey pavement towards The Emmanuel Goldstein Project, a new ‘supported housing’ venture run by the Oceania Housing Association. I’m employed by the Talbot Social Care Agency, which supplies staff to places like this, and I’ve got a six-month contract as a support worker.

Today is my first day.

Emmanuel Goldstein is located in a quiet residential street in a pleasant suburb of a small English town. As I walk, I look at the houses on either side – semi-detached Victorian or Edwardian villas which would cost a million pounds in Fulham. One or two have been divided into flats, but most are family homes, with ‘Neighbourhood Watch’ and ‘No callers’ stickers on the doors, pot plants in the windows and neat little front gardens.

I notice the litter. An empty cider can stuffed into a privet hedge here, a screwed up chip wrapper in the gutter there, cigarette butts everywhere on the cracked, grey slabs. As I draw nearer still to the Project, the quantity and variety of this detritus grows. An abandoned shopping trolley half-on and half-off the kerb; fast food cartons; crushed-up fag packets. Beer cans: mostly cheap, strong lager, some stamped flat, others skittering and rolling around in the breeze.

I stop at the driveway.

The Project is an imposing building: three storeys high, it has ornate brickwork, a high, sloping roof and large stone gateposts. Long ago it would have belonged to some wealthy factory owner or industrialist; more recently, it was a 3* hotel. Now it is a supported housing scheme.

In my experience, most people have never heard of supported housing; until I signed up with the agency for which I work, I hadn’t either. It’s run by the Department of Communities and Local Government via the ‘Supporting People’ programme. This scheme was launched in 2003 with an annual budget of around £1.7 billion and the remit of providing ‘housing-related support services’ to ‘vulnerable client groups’. Some of this is

really excellent work – helping deserving groups like the elderly and those with learning disabilities to live easier lives. However, it also means providing accommodation for young people ‘at risk of homelessness’. Between the ages of 16 and 25, they are too old to live in care but unable, for whatever reason, to live with their families. The idea is that we give them a roof over their heads, some freedom and responsibility and a little help in making the transition to living as an adult.

In theory, and occasionally in practice, this is a fine thing (although I quibble at just how much ‘support’ a 25-year-old ‘young person’ should require to sort out his or her life). Unfortunately, in my experience, it is widely abused. Some of the residents in supported housing are great kids, trying to make a go of their lives; the rest are mugging the taxpayer for billions. (When I talk about ‘taxpayers’, by the way, I’m not on about bankers, businessmen and other high earners, who could easily afford to pay in a bit more. I’m on about bin men, and dinner ladies, and people who clean loos and work in chip shops and sweep the streets for a living.)

The Emmanuel Goldstein Project is home to 66 young people: 58 of them live in single rooms in the main building, and the other eight live in a small block of one-bed flats at the front of the building. These latter are ex-residents of the Project who have moved on to what is described, slightly misleadingly, as ‘independent living’. It’s misleading because the word ‘independent’ here means, in most cases, that they have just about worked out how to sign on for themselves.

I will later discover that they are on a kind of rolling programme of eviction. This is because after spending a long time being, effectively, babysat in supported housing, they are unable to maintain a tenancy on their own.

I walk down the drive to the Project, stepping to one side to allow an ambulance to leave. Tall rows of mature yew trees, planted a century or more ago, whisper on either side of me; a purple hooded top hangs from one of them, and I count two more shopping trolleys and a couple of bin bags-worth of discarded tin cans, plastic boxes and paper wrappings lying around the place. There is more of this stuff beneath each of the ground floor windows.

The door is recessed into an open porch. It is metal, functional, with safety-glass windows, and firmly locked. To the right, there is a

flat, silver panel with a 10-digit keypad, a small fish-eye camera lens, a grill and an intercom button. I press the button.

After a few moments, an electronic voice appears and says, ‘Can you wait a sec?’ before disappearing.

It’s a few minutes before 9am, but somewhere overhead I can hear several stereos competing with each other. I’m not sure which is worse: drum ‘n’ bass, speed ragga and death metal on their own, or in this weird aural cocktail. I look up: a large CCTV camera stares balefully back at me.

I look down at my wrist and watch the second hand tick round through two minutes. Then I press the intercom button again.

A few seconds later, the same voice says, ‘I said, *Can you wait?*’

I lean forward to speak into the grill.

‘Hi,’ I say. ‘It’s just that the agency sent me. I’m the new support worker, so I wondered if...’

‘The new what?’ says the voice.

‘The new support worker,’ I say. ‘From the agency.’

‘Christ,’ says the voice, which now sounds thoroughly exasperated. ‘Don’t they tell you anything? We don’t use support worker any more. It’s *keyworker* now.’

‘I’m sorry?’ I say, but the buzzer is already sounding and the door has clicked ajar. I push it open and walk inside.

The reception lobby is white-painted and functional, with a blue nylon carpet over what I guess are the original flagstones. There is a table to the left of me and a table to the right, and piled upon each is a bewildering variety of leaflets: most seem to concern human rights, racism, drug helplines, benefits helplines, complaints procedures and stern warnings about HIV-AIDS, Hep B and the other dangers of unprotected sex.

On the walls are a number of garish posters. One advertises the benefits of the world’s top 10 religions, and a few others that are bubbling under, like Zoroastrianism. Another celebrates diversity and features huggy group shots of happy, smiling people from every corner of the earth. They all look like they’re having a whale of a time.

Sitting on one of the tables, smoking insouciantly underneath a large ‘No Smoking’ sign and another CCTV camera, is a youth of about 17. He clearly has nowhere pressing to be, despite it being a condition of living in these projects that you have a job or are looking for a job, or are attending school or a college course.

‘Hey, mate,’ I say, ‘can you tell me where the office is?’

‘How the fuck should I know?’ he says, slipping off the table and out of the door.

‘Thanks for that,’ I say, but it doesn’t matter: the office is clearly straight ahead. Through a long glass wall I can see a man of about my age sitting at a desk. A couple of teenagers are standing in front of him. The three of them appear to be arguing. I walk towards the door, knock and pop my head in. No-one seems to notice me, so I lean in the doorway and listen.

‘As I say, Kenny,’ says the man. ‘I’ll get you another key, but there’s a £12 charge.’

‘For fuck’s sake,’ says the youth, who I take to be Kenny. He is stereotypically skinny and ratty-faced, and is wearing a ‘No Fear’ baseball cap and a chunky gold sovereign ring. ‘It’s not my fault I lost the fucking thing. Just give me another one, will you?’

‘If it’s not your fault, whose fault is it?’

‘Like I told you, I lent it to Perry and he gave it to Marina and she got pissed and lost the fucking thing, not me. I need a fucking key, else I’m going to complain about you for this, because it ain’t fair.’

The man at the desk sighs. I sense he is struggling internally with the question of whether or not to prolong this by asking why on earth Kenny gave his key to Perry, when he knows to a certainty that Perry is an idiot, and anyone could have predicted that he would lose it within the hour. In the end, the line of least resistance is breached. ‘Christ on a bike,’ he hisses, under his breath. ‘Right, I’ll give you another key but next time...’

He reaches into a drawer, pulls out a box of keys, hunts through for a moment, and then hands one of them over.

‘You’re sound, you are, Brendan,’ says Kenny, with a wink and a sort of clenched fist gesture in the man’s direction. ‘Wicked!’ Then he and his accomplice are gone in a swish of Kappa’s finest polyester.

After a moment, I say, ‘Hi, I’m Winston. You buzzed me in? I’m the new... keyworker.’

‘Yeah,’ says the man. ‘I’m Brendan Blair. Pleased to meet you. Grab a seat. I’ll just fill out the form for Kenny’s new key, and then I’ll take you on a quick tour of the place.’

‘What was the ambulance doing?’ I say.

‘Sharn,’ he says. ‘She takes an overdose most weeks, or claims she has. Obviously, we can’t take any chances, but it’s just attention-seeking stuff – it’s never serious.’

I sit behind the other desk and look around me. The room is about 15ft long and 12ft wide, painted light beige and lit by harsh strip lights hanging beneath the polystyrene ceiling tiles. An Oceania Housing Association calendar is pinned on one wall; a small grey clock and a series of health and safety notices on another. Behind Brendan’s desk sits a CCTV monitor, its screen split up into 16 discrete pictures. There is a door marked ‘Manager’ leading through to the inner sanctum, the nerve centre, of the Project. The only other furniture in the office apart from the desks is four metal filing cabinets. On each of them, and on each desk, are several stacked files, all bulging with sheets of paper, forms and folders. I know from experience that the cabinets, too, will be groaning under the weight of the paperwork they hold.

Brendan has his head bent as he scribbles furiously on the form, so I look at the nearest file stack to me and idly pick up the topmost sheaf of A4 – a dozen or so sheets stapled together in the top left hand corner.

‘*Emmanuel Goldstein Project – Supporting People*’, says the legend on the first sheet. ‘*QAF Principle Objective Blue 1.6: Assessment Toolkit*’.

QAF – the Quality Assessment Framework – is a hugely bureaucratic way by which we in supported housing measure everything we do against a set of centrally-dictated benchmarks and metrics to prove beyond all possibility of challenge that we’re doing a good job. The truth is that it proves nothing of the sort; on the contrary, I think our slavish compliance with QAF pretty much ensures we *don’t* do a good job. Now, the very sight of those three letters fills my brain with a sort of irritated buzzing, like I’ve got a giant bluebottle stuck in my skull somewhere: I’ve seen countless hundreds, even thousands, of sheets of paper like this, and they drive me to despair. Part of me – a big part – wants to get up and walk out, there and then, never to return to the Emmanuel Goldstein Project or any other supported housing scheme anywhere in the country. But I need the money: £18,700 *per annum* is hardly a king’s ransom, but I’ve got bills and half a mortgage on a tiny flat where I live with my girlfriend, and it’s better than nothing.

I turn the page. I can only imagine that this stuff is produced by some sort of random sentence machine, a computer programmed with words and phrases like ‘stakeholder’, ‘service-user’, ‘proactive approach’ and ‘inter-agency liaison’.

‘Objective Blue Key Outcome 3, QAF target’ has the following header:

Personal support plans are regularly examined and, where necessary, revised to reflect outcomes of reviews.

Underneath this header are four boxes, each with space for notes, ticks, signatures and counter-signatures (and possibly counter-counter signatures). I choose one of the boxes at random.

Support workers (I notice the ‘keyworker’ edict has not yet been fully ‘cascaded’ through the organisation) are able to explain how wider support needs will be (or are being) met, including details of ongoing co-ordination with partner agencies concerned.

The boxes alongside have been neatly filled in, with annotations and remarks and approvals and suggestions and notes, endless notes, in several different pens and two or three hands. I flick through the pages and marvel – though I’m no stranger to any of this – at the sheer number of hours, not to mention the waste of paper and ink, involved. I put the papers back on the top of the stack, looking forward to adding a few kilos of my own in the course of the forthcoming six-month secondment.

Brendan puts his pen down and looks up at me. ‘Done,’ he says. ‘Right, come on, I’ll show you around.’

It takes a good three-quarters of an hour to get round the place. We walk up lots of sets of stairs, along various corridors, past rows of identikit doors. Brendan points out certain of them in particular as belonging to residents who are especially interesting, for one reason or another; he opens one to show me a room.

It's big and bright, and smells of fresh paint and new carpet. There's a fridge humming away in the corner; two tall windows and a door leading to an en-suite bathroom. The bathroom is sparkling. I wouldn't mind living here myself: it's bigger and better than my own flat.

'I assume they all have en-suite bathrooms?' I say.

'Yep,' says Brendan.

I look around the room. 'Nice,' I say.

'For the time being,' he says. 'We've got someone arriving for this one later today. I'll show you one that's just been vacated.'

We walk back down the corridor and stop outside another room.

'This one's empty at the moment,' he says, opening the door. 'We've just evicted Casey.'

'What for?' I say.

'You know,' says Brendan. 'The usual. Took ages to get rid of him, but he went in the end.'

In my experience of supported housing, 'the usual' could be taking or dealing drugs, being arrested for a serious crime, threatening staff or fellow residents or falling significantly behind with rent payments. The fact that it took a long time to evict Casey doesn't surprise me, either.

This room is in a different state from the first. There are indeterminate stains and cigarette burns all over the rose-coloured carpet; a window pane is smashed; the paint has been pulled from the walls in many places where Sellotaped posters have been torn down; the inside of the door has been spray-painted with a large cannabis leaf; and the electric light switch has been wrenched or hammered from the wall. Brendan leads me through to the bathroom; it stinks of urine and worse, and something has been smeared all over the mirror.

'Do they all end up in this sort of state?' I say.

'To be fair, we do have some decent residents,' says Brendan. 'You know what it's like – there are those who are grateful for what they get and respect the place. There are just more who don't, for whatever reason. I'd say a lot of them end up smelling like this. I can't see how they can stand it personally, but there you go.'

This chimes with my own experience working in a number of projects.

‘It’s going to take some cleaning up, all this,’ I say.

The carpet will probably need replacing. With the electrics, the window and the redecoration, I can’t see us getting much change out of a thousand quid – not to mention the cleaning bill.

We go back out into the corridor and pause at another doorway.

‘This is one of the kitchens,’ says Brendan. ‘We have 54 rooms, and 18 kitchens, so each one is shared between three rooms.’

I poke my head inside. The bin is overflowing, the sink is full of filthy dishes and pans and the cooker covered with congealed fat. It smells rank, and there are flies everywhere.

‘They’re on a warning to clean this place up,’ says Brendan. ‘Actually, a number of the kitchens are on the same warning.’

We head back downstairs, through the lobby and into a laundry area full of washing machines and tumble driers. It smells damp, and there are piles of wet, mouldering washing on the floor and every other surface.

‘That’s the laundry,’ says Brendan, leading me back out into the lobby and then into a large rectangular room, ‘and this is the residents’ lounge.’

A handful of youths are sitting in armchairs or on sofas, watching the biggest flat screen plasma TV I’ve ever seen. I hate to stereotype, but they are actually watching *The Jeremy Kyle Show*.

‘Guys, this is Winston,’ says Brendan. ‘He’s the new keyworker.’

No-one looks up. Brendan shrugs, mutters *Don’t get up*, and we walk through another doorway in the far wall.

‘And this is the computer room,’ he says. ‘We’ve hooked up the internet for the residents, and this is also where they come for in-house courses and things like that.’

There are half a dozen nice new PCs sitting at desks. Like everything else in this place – the kitchens full of flies, the en-suite bedrooms and the huge communal television – they are provided free of charge. It occurs to me that I wouldn’t mind a brand new telly and computer in my own flat, but unfortunately I’d have to pay for them myself and I don’t have the cash.

We head back out through the common room and the lobby and into the office.

‘That’s about it,’ says Brendan. ‘There’s a couple of other meeting rooms out the back which we rent out to local groups and stuff and

sometimes use ourselves. There's the grounds, obviously. But basically, you've seen the lot. Any questions?'

'There seem to be a lot of people hanging around,' I say. I look at my watch. 'It's nearly 10 o'clock... are they not supposed to be working or at college or something?'

'Most of these you've seen today are on JSA (Job Seekers' Allowance),' he says.

'Well, they don't seem to be seeking jobs,' I say.

'Welcome to the Project!' says Brendan.

INTRODUCING MYSELF

I SUPPOSE I SHOULD introduce myself.

My name is Winston Smith, I'm 34 years old and I'm a support worker – sorry, *keyworker* – in the supported housing sector. When it's offered, I also take on extra, part-time work in residential care homes with children between the ages of 12 and 17. To work in care homes is to inhabit an extra circle of hell beyond the limits of Dante's imagination, but I'm broke so I don't have a lot of choice. More of that later.

I've explained the basic idea behind supported housing, but here's an excerpt from the 'service definition' at the Emmanuel Goldstein Project which gives you a fuller flavour – at least, as far as this sort of strangled officialese allows – of what the place does.

Our project exists to help disadvantaged young people aged between 16 and 25 who are homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless, and who need support to develop independent living skills. With each young person we have a binding contract, known as a licence agreement, which outlines the conditions of the young person's stay at our project. This agreement will enable the young person to achieve independence. Failure to consistently adhere to the agreement adversely affects a young person's right to accommodation at the project. Licence agreements last for up to two years.

On the face of it, this all sounds very noble and laudable. We've all seen homeless people sleeping in wet shop doorways and on bare park benches; in a civilised and (still) wealthy country like this, who wouldn't want to give them a temporary roof over their heads while they sort their lives out?

The devil is in the detail of how we go about it. When I started working in the sector, I was a true believer. Given that I am a *Guardian*-reading liberal vegetarian, with a first-class degree in Politics, Philosophy and Sociology and a Masters' in International Relations, perhaps that's not too surprising; you don't get too many paid-up members of the Conservative Party in my end of the public services.

The thing is, I got mugged by reality. I learned that the rhetoric doesn't match the facts – in fact, it *obscures* the facts. Phrases like 'disadvantaged young people', 'at risk of becoming homeless' and 'develop independent living skills' sucked me in for a while; 'binding contract' was another good one. The trouble is, these words turn out to be meaningless, or worse. In fact, this project and many others like it create and perpetuate the exact problems they're ostensibly designed to eradicate. This is hugely costly and destructive to society but, above all, it's a tragedy for the kids involved.

Here's what the service definition has to say about my role as a keyworker:

All of our clients at the project have their own keyworker, with whom they must meet regularly to comply with the conditions of their occupancy. The keyworker, through action-planning, will offer guidance and assistance in a range of areas.

What this means is that when a new resident arrives and is allocated to me, I'll have a meeting with him and discuss his current position vis à vis employment or education, benefits, paying his rent and the future in general. Together, we'll draw up a 'support plan' – a document which will lay out his goals and how he aims (with my support) to reach them. Over the weeks and months that follow, we'll meet up regularly to ensure he's hitting his targets.

Once again, this doesn't sound too bad: let's take these homeless youngsters off those park benches and get them into jobs or training, or even benefits. What could possibly be wrong with that?

Unfortunately, plenty. Obviously, it will involve a lot of paperwork. This is a given; the British State sector leads the world in the production and infilling of forms. But this is really just a minor pain in the arse, not the main problem. After all, if the goal was 'Become a rocket scientist', there would be a lot of stages to be passed through along the way, and you'd expect to have to write a few things down. But it's when you consider that the goal is 'Sign on the dole' that you begin to wonder how difficult that is, and how many meetings you need to have to discuss it. As you'll see, the answer to these questions seems to be, respectively, 'Very' and 'A lot.'

As well as Brendan and myself, there is Olive, the part-time receptionist, and eight other employees. Margaret, Steve, Posy and Nigel are full-time keyworkers (Posy and Nigel are night-workers, who rotate their way through a four-days-on, four-days-off shift pattern). There's also a part-timer, Abigail, who does three days a week, a tutor called Gene who comes in twice a week, and a project manager, Martin, who oversees the running of the place. Mostly, this means that Martin ensures that we keyworkers are filling in all those support plans correctly, in accordance with government regulations on form-filling, as well as dealing with a whole additional layer of bureaucratic requirements set by both the Department of Communities and Local Government and Oceania Housing Association which runs the Project (Oceania is one of the leading housing associations in the country, employing a large number of people nationally).

The project manager has the theoretical power to terminate any troublesome resident's tenancy, but this power is constrained by the resident's right of appeal to the manager's manager, the area business manager (ABM), Tessa (a former Manager of this project, as it happens).

The ABM oversees the work of all the project managers at various individual sites throughout the county. As far as I can tell, this seems to involve ensuring that the project managers are filling in *their* forms correctly, as well as overseeing and double-checking the project managers' supervision of the keyworkers' filling-in of *our* forms.

Above ABM Tessa, at head office down in London, is another layer of management – the manager's manager's manager (and, no doubt, a manager's manager's manager's manager, too), as well as various people working in public relations roles, policy development, human resources and finance.

The people at the top earn hundreds of thousands of pounds. The people at the bottom, like me, sadly don't.

A bit more about me. I'm originally from Ireland and, as a youngster, I dreamed of becoming a journalist. I actually signed onto a journalism course to learn the trade but unfortunately I was a very heavy dope smoker – I'd start the day with a giant spliff, and carry on from there, spending most of my waking hours absolutely mashed, lying around listening to old soul records. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I

flunked my first year because I kept forgetting to turn up for lectures. I signed up a second time, but when I noticed that I was forgetting to turn up again I started to wonder whether journalism was for me. At the end of that year, which I flunked again, I decided that it wasn't and went back to live with my parents in Ireland – their firm condition being that I sorted out my drug use with some counselling.

For a while, I knocked the gear on the head, and got myself a job washing dishes in a restaurant. Of course, the one thing places like that have is plenty of booze, so I really just swapped one chemical distractant for another and became a serious pisshead instead. It got to the point where the only things I spent my wages on were alcohol and rent (I ate free at work); when I lost my door key one time, Kenny-style, I remember spending every evening for two weeks sitting outside my flat waiting for my flatmate to come home and let me in. This was because it would have cost me the price of a pint to have a new key cut, and I didn't want to be down a pint.

Along the way, I somehow took up the dope again, and other drugs when I could get my hands on them. I also picked up a criminal record for possession. A counsellor told me I had an addictive personality – no shit, Sherlock – and although they say you can't get addicted to cannabis, I certainly did. I was psychologically dependent on both weed and booze, and my life was going nowhere. I was getting depressed, I was suffering anxiety attacks and, eventually, I reached a crossroads: I could either carry on killing myself slowly on a barstool or I could pull myself together.

I followed John Hodge's advice from *Trainspotting*, and chose life. I quit drinking and smoking altogether – I've been teetotal and drug-free for a decade now – and went to university, got my head down and achieved the aforementioned results.

Why am I telling you all this? For two reasons.

Firstly, to show that I am not someone who has lived a sheltered existence. I experienced personal problems in my own youth, including addictions which affected my mental health and my education. So if I sometimes seem a bit hard on some of the kids we'll meet throughout the book, it's not because I'm some kind of ideological reactionary, coming from a position of ignorance or naivety.

Secondly, I want to stress that my own experience shows that no matter how low you get – and I got very low indeed – you can bring

yourself back through hard work and a bit of tough love from those who care about you.

After uni, I spent a bit of time teaching in Spain, and then I came to England to take up a position as a teaching assistant in a tough comprehensive school in the north. My initial plan was to spend a year in that role and then take a Post Graduate Certificate in Education. But the mayhem that I witnessed in the school, and the failure of senior management to deal with troublesome and often dangerous students, or protect the weaker and more vulnerable from extreme bullying, shocked me. Those kids who wanted to learn were all but ignored, while the classes were filled with unruly students on account of the then government's policy of inclusion. I took the advice of some curmudgeonly teachers nearing retirement, and decided the world of bog standard comprehensives was not for me.

But I still felt attracted to the public services, and thought that I had something to give. So I went on to seek what I thought would be more meaningful work with young people in the social care sector.

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