

On The Way Out

I could have gone out in a blaze of glory. A top grade student would have been nice. Something to show for all these years. What I get is Wayne Robinson. Ah well, so it goes. Story of your life, Rosie.

"Alors, maintenant j'ai quelques questions pour toi. Tu es confortable?"

"Uh..... je m'appelle Wayne.....?"

The hesitation and rising intonation betray his uncertainty ... and already I have a fair idea of how this is going to go. He hasn't really got a clue what I was asking him but he does know how to tell me his name, so he's trusting to luck – what Sid always refers to as 'winging it'.

At this level all we're concerned with is whether the message has been communicated. Has the student managed to grunt? Forget accuracy, accent, syntax, style, intonation, originality - grunting with quality is for advanced students. For the Waynes of this world, all that matters is whether whatever we manage to wring from them would have been intelligible to a sympathetic native speaker. In Wayne's case, we're going to be trawling depths of sympathy hitherto untapped – we are talking sainthood here at the very least.

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Baseball, apparently. Rosie? You with me, girl? This Gehrig fella. Baseball player. Just googled him. According to this he was

American - well, he would be, wouldn't he?

I mean, where else do they play the stupid game?

Not just any old baseball player, by the sound of it. Some kind of all-American hero.

Listen. *Born June 19, 1903. Set several Major League and American League records. Voted the greatest first baseman of all time,* which would probably be impressive if I gave a stuff. What the hell is a first baseman anyway? *Still holds the record for most career grand slam home runs, blah-di-blah ...* I tell you, girl - you ought to be reading this, not me. You're the linguist.

Says here he was still at the top of his game at 35, died aged 37.

(pause)

Jesus...that's quick. Bit bloody final. Come in, number 1, your time's up. Puts my fall from grace into perspective, eh? Can't see anyone googling me years from now, can you? Mind you, I guess he had to be somebody pretty significant – they don't name things after just anybody, do they?

Not even fatal illnesses.

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Maybe he's taken home the printed list of questions which I suggested might come up. For 'suggested' read more or less *guaranteed*. If they can be bothered to take the questions home, work out suitable answers and learn them off by heart, they can trust me to work them in somewhere. Sid thinks it's a joke - I'm nothing more than a glorified waitress. *French GCSE on a plate - anything else I can get you, sir?*

Unfortunately I couldn't resist treating them to one of my reassuring little exhortations. *Always have a guess - if all else fails keep your eyes on me and try to pick up clues. Anything is better than nothing.* I have a feeling that Wayne, bless him, is about to highlight the limitations of this particular line of reasoning. What I was advocating as a last resort, he has seized upon as a strategy for success. Hey, why spend hours revising if he can rely on me to find a way through? So there he sits, chewing the ever-present piece of gum and waiting for the chance to play follow my leader.

I would normally start by asking him his name but he's already given it, unprompted. Even so, I'm momentarily tempted to do it anyway. I could, it occurs to me, have a lot of fun now if I were cruel enough. Wayne could be condemned to an entire oral of answering the question I'm about to ask next. In fact, why stop there? Why stick to the script? I could throw in a slightly more demanding question here and there.

- Right then, Wayne...what do you think of the economic and political situation in Albania right now?

- Ah...16?

- Excellent. And violence...do you see this as an inevitable consequence of social inequality?

- Ah...Middleton-on-sea.

- Super. And Voltaire...do you think that there is, in his work, a certain dryness, a certain detachment which ultimately fails to engage the sympathies of the reader?

- ...ah...a small village near Bognor.

And there he sits, so unsuspecting, so confident that despite everything I'll be there for him. Am I really such a soft touch? Should I be flattered that it never occurs to Wayne that I could be anything other than supportive? What if, just once, I were to do something extraordinary and remind everyone that there's a real person in here? Could anyone really blame me?

I don't need to ask Sid – I know what he'd say. I can hear him whispering away, egging me on. It's the subversive in him: *go on, Rosie – let him have it. Both barrels, girl.* But then I look at Wayne, running his fingers through hair that hasn't been washed in weeks and furiously massaging his scalp, and I know I don't have it in me. Soft touch is about right.

So I dutifully ask him his age, and it turns out he's eleven, which is quite an endearing answer really - his mind has locked on to the last time he answered the question correctly. I get a flashback to those salad days before the drive to be street-wise got the better of him and it became 'uncool' to care. Then he realises his

mistake, frowns and changes his mind, tells me instead that he is six, which may be no nearer the truth but which at least suggests he's taking this seriously.

I smile encouragingly to persuade him that things are going swimmingly. Golden rule number one - never, *never* give any indication that the previous answer was a disaster lest it adversely affect subsequent ones. It doesn't matter how ludicrous it may be...

- Have you any pets?
- My mother is a housewife.
- I see. What does she do at home?
- 12. And my sister is 9.
- Excellent.

As the oral progresses however, I'm pleasantly surprised to discover that I understand some of the things he says. They may not always be in response to the right question, but he is communicating to some extent. Mind you, it's a good job this tape will be assessed by someone who knows nothing about the lad, because he's being more than a little economical with the truth. Not that you could blame him exactly. "*My father is a drunken slob who nicks lead off church roofs*" is not exactly standard GCSE vocabulary.

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The French call it 'maladie de Charcot', apparently. No – don't 'Sid' me. This is

interesting. OK girl, here's a test for you. What's a charcot? No, charcot – C-H-A-R-C-O-T. No? You sure? I'll take your word for it. You should know. Must be a person in that case. Makes sense, I suppose. They always seem to ... they always want to name these ... Jesus! Couldn't give me a hand with these sodding buttons, could you, girl? I can't seem to...

Thanks, love.

Wonder who he was? Famous boules player maybe? Top pastry chef? Mime artist? Napoleon's batman? No, I know - he'll be a bloody cyclist, won't he? That'll be it. One of those silly sods who haul themselves up and down mountains every year. The French love 'em. It'll be something like Jacques Charcot, five-times winner of the Tour de France, national hero natur ... elle ... ment. Awarded the Légion d'honneur for distinguished service. Beret. Waxed moustache. Lover extra...ordi...naire, goes without saying. Died suddenly, cut down in his prime. I can just see him, staggering up

Alpe d'Huez, string of onions round his
neck, just about to freewheel down the
other side when suddenly - merde alors,
what ees 'appening to my arms and legs?
Will someone please 'elp me to remove
zees yellow jersey?

(sighs)

Just being whimsical, Rosie. Gotta laugh,
haven't you?

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I remember Wayne's father. I only met him once, a rat-faced weasel of a man with a piercing stare and the sort of halitosis that clogs the throat and stays with you for days afterwards. He had these sticky-out ears which made a powerful case against his number 2 crop, and several days' stubble which did little to soften the sharpness of his features. I remember he was wearing grease-smearred denims, several sizes too large, and a faded and dubiously stained t-shirt which, for some unfathomable reason, extolled the virtues of Clacton-on-sea.

That solitary visit was enough to convince him that he'd adequately discharged his parental responsibilities. Thereafter it was Mrs Robinson who sat there on her own, shoulders stooped in readiness for the inevitable onslaught. I must confess to a sneaking admiration for this sad little woman, old before her time, in her shabby coat and fake fur collar. Her gentle shrug of the shoulders and smile of

resignation invariably steal my thunder before I've even started to detail the ways in which her son has let himself down. She listens apologetically, tries to reason with Wayne in front of us, winces at his rudeness and hostility and then dutifully trudges home to who knows what sort of life.

- What does your mother do for a living?

- She's a housewife.

Sometimes GCSE vocabulary isn't enough.

Wayne needs a good male role model at home. Someone like Sid would have been perfect. Sid would have shared everything with him, given him a sense of purpose. They'd have built model aeroplanes together. He'd have taken him fishing overnight, camping out in a little tent. They'd have spent hours in that garage of his, stripping down old engines and building a car from the spare parts.

I've always thought Sid would have been a wonderful father.

Nearly was once. Couple of times in fact. Just for a few months.

Nearly.

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Actually there's some good stuff in here, Rosie. Should have just read this and not bothered with the so-called specialist ... what was his name? Estevez? Fuckwit, he was - 'scuse my French. I kid you not, a

conspiracy theorist could have a field day with all this. How many Spanish consultants do you suppose there are in the whole of the NHS? Half a dozen, tops? Stephen bloody Hawkings has probably got the finest medical minds in the world falling over each other to offer advice. Who do I get? Bloody Manuel.

All that floppy black hair. Thinks he's God's gift to women. The way he kept running his hand through it every other sentence. Do you suppose he practises it every morning in the mirror? Like a soprano going through her scales or an athlete warming up?

And what was all that guff about not wanting to insult my intelligence? 'I will not prevaricate over the exigencies of the situation, Mr. James.' I should have known right then. I should have screamed. PREVARICATE? EXIGENCIES? What the hell is this, Call My Bluff? You want to communicate, try pulling the thesaurus out of your arse and say what you mean.

And then all of that oh so sensible advice on what we can do to get the best out of the time we'll have together. You'd have thought he was flogging some retirement condo in Florida. What was that if not prevarication? I should have told him.

Don't thrash around in the undergrowth, señor. Don't palliate your verbal utterances.

WHY NOT CALL A SPADE AN INTERMENT FACILITATOR?

Better off reading this than traipsing over there to see him. Nice and clear, this is. No shades of grey, just black and white. Treats you like an adult.

Fact: ALS is a progressive, fatal, neurodegenerative disease caused by the wasting away of motor neurons.

Fact: these motor neurons are the nerve cells in the central nervous system that control voluntary muscle movement.

Fact: once diagnosed, you've probably got somewhere between three to five years before everything shuts down for good.

Sodding great, totally unavoidable fact:

no cure, just three certainties.

One: you get worse.

Two: you know exactly what you're losing as you lose it.

And three: you die.

That's it. That's all I need to know. The rest, señor, is nothing more than pre-bloody-varication.

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"Miss?"

I take a second, make a show of shuffling the papers on my desk. He's struggling with the next question so I help by repeating it, this time using the word "weekend". Dawn breaks across his face.

- Oh yeah.....weekend.....ah.....je PS3.....je football.....je BMX.

No mention of hanging around the gates to Hadley Park until the early hours of the morning with a gang of undesirables who left this place some time ago, no better equipped to cope with life than when they first came through the doors. No reference to the incident last year when he allegedly roughed up some unsuspecting Italian lad over here on an exchange and took his wallet. Je BMX, right?

Maybe I'm being unnecessarily churlish. He *is* at least here. And if I needed

further proof of his good intentions, I have it now because he has just told me his favourite subject is French.

- Et.....je detest le Integrated Humanities. Le prof onwee.....onwee.....

He shakes his head in disappointment. He desperately wants me to know that his Humanities teacher is boring but at the crucial moment his memory has let him down. I let him see with a smile of encouragement that I appreciate the gesture. Two weeks ago it would have been:

"le prof...sad gayboy".

I choose this moment to call a halt. Quit while you're ahead, Rosie. You never know what disaster lurks just around the corner. Better to put the shovel away now. I turn off the cassette and he flops back into his chair, heaving this huge sigh of relief. Thinks he's done well, bless him. Long as he gets his C, he says, that's all that matters. Ah...so what do I say to that? I mean, he's exceeded by some margin my expectations but he's as much a grade C linguist as I am Kate Moss.

Says he's hoping to do a BTEC in Manufacturing at the nearby college. *A BTEC in Manufacturing?* In different circumstances, I'd be throwing my head back and howling at that one. He can't even spell Manufacturing. What am I saying? He'd struggle to spell BTEC. Sometimes you have to wonder at the Careers guidance our students receive.

And all of a sudden I can see how things are going to turn out for Wayne. He

won't be accepted back here - he may get in at a college to do some vocational course but he'll drop out after a couple of months the moment they expect him to work. And that's when that flicker of hope that could so easily have been nurtured and encouraged will be extinguished. He'll spend all day hanging around Hadley Park, tempting the next generation of Waynes away from lessons until he finally oversteps the mark and completes the self-fulfilling prophecy, our tacit expectation of him for some time now. He will leave here, barely numerate, far from literate and almost inarticulate, an irredeemable sociopath...but he *will* be able to book a hotel room the next time he finds himself in St Tropez or Guadeloupe, which will of course feature high on his list of holiday destinations. I have been so meaningfully occupied all these years.

Wayne hauls himself to his feet and smiles. "Course, I could always do French A-Level" he says with what I hope is a touch of self-deprecating humour. Then, as he shuffles out, I am vaguely aware of laughter from an adjoining classroom. Nice to know that someone is enjoying his work - unless Sisyphus is shaking his head somewhere in disbelief.

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You got orals tomorrow, Rosie? Shouldn't you be doing all your preparation an' things? You can't just go in and wing it, can you? Go on - don't worry about me. I'll be fine. I'll just finish off here, then there's

something I want to watch on the History Channel. I'll give you a shout if I need anything.

Tell you what, why don't you pick up an Indian and a bottle of something nice on the way home tomorrow and we'll have a drink to celebrate, eh? What d'you think? Can't just let all those years go without something to mark it, can we? Fancy that?

Speaking of which, you going into the kitchen by any chance? Couldn't possibly get me a lager, could you? Only it says here that the illness, particularly in its early stages, often manifests itself in an intense craving for alcoholic beverages...and indulging this craving is recommended as it tends to alleviate some of the patient's anxieties. Naah ... only kidding. Made that bit up. Wouldn't mind one though, if you're heading in that direction.

This ALS...you know what it stands for? Says here it's Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis. Greek, you reckon? Apparently 'a' indicates

'without', 'myo' refers to 'muscle' and 'trophic' means 'nourishment'. So I'll be officially 'without muscle nourishment'. Makes a change from 'without muscle definition', eh? Think anyone will notice the difference? Your mother always used to call me Biafra, remember? Funny how things come full circle.

I think I prefer ALS ... don't like this Lou Gehrig business. Bad enough going through life with the same name as a Carry On actor. Last thing I want now is to find myself linked to some bozo who spent his life hitting a ball around a park with a stick. I swear to God, Rosie – I don't know what I did to offend Him up there but He must be laughing His ... Rosie? What's the matter, love? You OK? Ah, Jesus, Rosie ... I'm sorry, girl...

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Biography



Graham Minett lives in West Sussex where he works as project manager at the school where he once taught. He is completing an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Chichester. He has been short-listed for a number of competitions but the Segora Prize is his first major success. He is currently working on a novel.

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