

INSPECTING the ISLAND

Hylde Sims

Seven-Ply Yarns

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Coralford School is loosely based on Summerhill School, where I was educated, but is not a photocopy. The character of Muir is mostly derived from A. S. Neill, its founder and first head. Those who know of Homer Lane will recognise his ghost in Plato Tewson's brief appearance. Other characters are entirely fictional as are all the events and situations described.

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Hylde Sims

"This is an island. At least I think it's an island."

(Piggy, in *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding)

Prologue

Twenty years ago, first time I went up the big tree. Fourteen, I was. Grows their side of the wall, hangs over it. Easy. You grab the low branches and swing yourself up. You can just walk in there down the drive, but I prefer to climb up the wall straight into the tree, sit there secret, watching them. Remember it, hot in my head still. Changed out of my uniform, sweaty and itchy where I'd been sat all day, and into my cadet gear, my camouflage stuff. Got my dad's binoculars from his drawer. He hadn't got home yet to give me one for not making my bed properly or something. Hadn't got the stick at school either, not that day. One of my better days.

Some of them were sitting around on tree trunks in front of the school. Boys and girls. Some had their arms round each other. This old man comes up. They don't stand up or stop touching the girls. "I'm the school inspector," the old man says with a serious face. A boy says, "Fuck off, Muir. We all know you're only the gardener." They all laugh. The old man sits down with them and they offer him something, chocolate or something.

You see the swimming pool from the tree, round by the side of the house. Kids floating about in old car tyres. Couple of girls lying on towels. Nothing on. You can see their tits! Could hardly believe what I was looking at. Made my head thud. I focussed the binoculars and took a good long look.

This little kid comes towards the tree riding his bike over the humps. He jumps off the bike and lets it fall onto the grass. The wheels carry on spinning. There's a rope hangs down from the tree with a loop in it. He climbs up to the fork. I flatten myself against the trunk of the tree on the road side. He never sees me. He puts his foot in the loop, hangs on to the rope and goes

swinging out over the grass. The rope swings back, he pushes against the tree with his free foot and goes swinging out again.

I look down through the leaves. The bark's scratching my face, I see the top of his head, long hair flying out. I can feel the wind through his hair, the way the rope takes him. I feel dizzy, sick. Eight times I count him do it. Then he takes his foot out of the loop and holding on just with his hands he swings out again, lets go in mid-air, lands on his feet on the grass, grabs his bike and rides off. I know I'll never get rid of him, this kid, this scruffy, jammy little bastard of a kid, hair shining in the sun like a lit bulb, flying through the air, flying up and down the humps on his old bike.

I shin down the tree, brush my fatigues down and get the bus home. Get there before my dad gets in, put the binoculars back. I'm careful to wipe them clean so he won't suspect I've touched them. He's rough when he catches you touching his stuff. I'm up in my room, doing my homework and the fatigues and the school uniform all hanging clean and straight in my wardrobe by the time I hear him come in, slamming the door and shouting out for me in his loud, angry voice.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Maz shot out of the undergrowth between the inspector's legs as the inspector stood gazing at the hillocks of uneven grass known, he understood, as the hockey field. The inspector brushed a piece of grass from his knee.

"Where should you be, lad?"

Maz shook the leaves out of his hair. He looked puzzled. He took in the well-polished leather shoes, the tie, the refusal to move, the practised unsmiling stare. He shrugged. "Sorry, didn't mean to mess up your clothes. You the inspector?"

"I don't think that's any of your business, do you?"

Maz's frown deepened to hurt. He wriggled backwards, away from the inspector, jumped to his feet and ran off.

"Hey you, come back!"

The inspector was feeling in his pockets, as if worried for the safety of his money - or was he fumbling for a sweet?

Maz disappeared behind the main house.

The inspector knew he hadn't played it right, but he didn't know how else to play it. These children unnerved him with their level gaze and their straightforward serious questions. A lot of the time they didn't seem to notice him at all. His presence didn't change their behaviour in the slightest. They joked, swore, offered him biscuits from their food parcels as if he was one of them. When he couldn't respond in kind, finding himself saying something patronising with a false matey smile like "I won't let on you said that," they looked at him pityingly and drifted off - to the tree swing, to their rooms, to their lessons, to the art room, to God knows where.

He looked along the front of the house. Victorian, he supposed. A modest Victorian manor, originally the country seat of some successful industrialist. Once it would have been staffed by a dozen retainers - gardeners, cooks, skivvies. Now it was shabby.

The crumbly red bricks had initials and dates scored into them going back to the thirties. A few cars were parked in front of the windows on the hard baked earth, which must turn into mud when it rained; in front of that a stretch of grass which had been recently mown, with some handsome ash and beech trees; around the house unkempt grass, paths, more trees, a number of one-storeyed outbuildings, and the weathered wattle fence of the swimming-pool. Visible behind the house in the distance was a steep green hill with the black towers of Eliston Castle silhouetted against the summer sky.

No-one else in sight. He didn't know what to do or where to go next. He had the feeling that kids must be watching him out of the row of sash windows that blinked through the ivy and virginia creeper hanging from the eaves or perhaps they were simply looking through him. Then he noticed two girls leaning out of an upstairs end window. They were watching housemartins flying into a nest under the gutter carrying food for their young and winging away again towards the trees.

You were lucky to find more than half a dozen kids together at any one time, except at the meeting.

Ah yes, the meeting! A bedraggled looking youngster of indeterminate age and sex emerged now from the front door and ran round the grounds clanging an old brass bell. Kids straggled into the house in response, taking their time. The boy Maz shot round the side of the house on a bike too small for him, scuffed to a stop, propped the bike against the bricks and ran inside. The inspector followed him into the lounge, a large room with several exits which seemed like a kind of junction for the rest of the building.

The kids were settling onto the floor, propped against the scarred oak-panelled walls. Some sat in tiers up what must have once been a rather grand staircase curving out of the room. Some were cuddling each other - even boys and girls, even boys. A few staff and older children had younger ones attached to them

like limpets, ensconced between their knees, lolling on their shoulders. There were - the inspector gave a surreptitious head count - about sixty of them, a scruffy looking bunch of all ages, as well as about ten equally scruffy looking adults. It wasn't too easy to tell the one from the other.

Could you compare it to assembly? To those tidy rows of chairs with the uniformed children, the line monitors, the adults seated facing them but just that bit higher on the rostrum? Other teachers stationed strategically down the sides of the hall, the head ready, waiting for the murmur of voices to die down respectfully so he could give his simplified message about quiet bravery and loyalty and God, make his announcements about the after-school clubs and have his usual moan about the graffiti on the stairs? You could assess that sort of thing. Did the head speak pleasantly but authoritatively? Were the staff in control at all times? Did the ingress to the hall and the egress to the classrooms proceed smoothly with a minimum of opportunity for pushing and shoving? Were the pupils in their lessons and on task within the five minutes allotted for changeover? You could assess that sort of thing. It fitted in with the notion of targets, training, right and wrong.

But here?

Muir himself, about to become one hundred years old, was helped to a wooden armchair in one corner, where he took out his baccy and slowly filled his pipe. The chairman, a girl of fourteen or so with long, straight blonde hair and kneeless blue jeans, and the secretary, a boy of the same age who looked Japanese, were conferring over an exercise book.

"OK," the girl said, straightening up, "meeting come to order. Kevin, shut up, I said come to order."

Kevin (he was the maths teacher, the inspector recalled) grinned at her warily, "OK, OK," and propped himself on the wall opposite the secretary.

The room gradually went quiet. A few people were knitting. Apparently that was the current craze. Even Maz, he saw, had acquired knitting from somewhere; a large white object - a sweater, he supposed - was draped over his crossed legs like a pet sheep. A thick wooden needle was tucked under one arm, the other needle clicked in and out.

"OK," the chairman said. "Any visitors?"

A little girl with a dirty, round, freckled face nudged the inspector helpfully. "You're a visitor, aren't you?"

The inspector raised his hand uncertainly.

"Could the visitors wait outside," the chairman said, "through that door, in the lobby?"

The inspector and a couple of other visitors did as they were told. Through the glass door the inspector could see the voting on whether to allow the visitors to attend the meeting. It appeared to be a rubberstamping process, for within a minute a girl opened the door and called, "You can come in now."

No chairs were left, so the inspector sat awkwardly on a rickety bench next to a little boy extrovertly chewing bubble-gum.

Another visitor, a small woman about his own age with greying hair, stepped carefully over the children on the lower treads and sat on the stairs. She looked at home with the place and its customs, though the inspector had not seen her before in the three days he had been there. Now for the first time he looked at her properly, across the scratched bannister rail. He thought afterwards that it hadn't been the face itself but the small, sideways twist to her smile, which made her unmistakable, even after all these years. He coloured up. His heart floated, then sank. He wanted to run out and hide or rush up the stairs and grab her. Her indulgent lopsided grin was pitched towards the chairman.

"OK," said the chairman, tossing back her hair. "First business: Brendan versus the Carriage Kids for keeping the Shack awake after lights out. Brendan."

A thin boy with wiry red hair spoke in an intense voice. "Last night the Carriage Kids were playing their stereos after Shack beddies. I told them to shut up and Simon told me to fuck off. These kids think just because they're in the Carriages now they can break the fucking law."

The inspector, beaming insincerely, suppressed an automatic wince. A few hands went up.

"Simon," said the chairman.

A tall older boy with rimless glasses moved a smaller child sitting on his lap on to the floor and stood up to speak. "Those guys weren't trying to sleep. They were making a hell of a noise themselves. Try asking them to shut up. I kicked

Brendan out of my room because he was messing with my stuff and then he just wanted to get his own back." He sat down again and the small child snuggled back on to his lap.

"Katie."

A plump girl wearing a long red dress spoke up from the stairs. "That's beside the point, Simon. What's the point of having a silence rule if you guys don't keep it? You big kids are supposed to set an example." She giggled. "Anyway we could hear you right over at the house".

"Hear, hear." A murmur of voices went round.

The inspector took out a small book labelled "Coralford School, July 1999" and wrote the words, "conciliation techniques via student exchange. Teacher input?" He disliked the words he had written, they seemed stilted and irrelevant.

"What are you doing?" the little boy next to him asked, and pouted out a livid pink balloon.

"I'm . . . er . . . trying to write down what they're doing."

The boy popped his gum. "The secretary does that." He indicated the Japanese boy who was sitting on the floor next to the chairman, writing in the exercise book. "What's your name?"

"Er . . . Mr Bignold," the inspector said.

"No, I mean, your first name. What are you called?"

"I don't think that's any of . . . " The inspector checked himself. ". . . Er, Jasper . . . Bit of a silly name," he finished lamely. "What's -"

"Quiet !" The chairman looked over at the bench sternly, "Next person to make a noise, one p fine. I'm taking proposals now."

The inspector coloured again and glanced over at the other visitor on the stairs who appeared to be following the business intently.

"Aaron."

The boy next to Jasper took the bubble-gum out of his mouth and stretched it between his fingers. "I propose the Carriage is fined late beddies next Saturday"

"I second that," Maz said, parting his short hair with a knitting needle.

"I propose we get a strong warning and if we do it again we're fined beddies," Simon said. The meeting laughed.

"Any more proposals? OK, all in favour of Aaron's proposal?" The chairman repeated it carefully. Half a dozen hands went up and she counted them. "All in favour of Simon's proposal?"

Almost everyone put a hand up, including, the inspector saw with surprise, the boy Brendan, who had brought the complaint. He wrote, "Defused confrontation via student-centered decision-making process. Teacher input?" Muir sat puffing pensively on his pipe, having voted for the first proposal.

"OK, carried." The chairman looked deliberately in Simon's direction, "Simon and other carriage kids: strong warning not to make a noise after beddies. Do it again and you'll get fined. Next business?" She glanced down at the secretary.

"John staff versus Class Three for not putting the woodwork tools away." The secretary's l's sounded very faintly like r's

The businesses proceeded, first the discussion, then the proposals, then the vote. The worst that seemed to happen to anyone was a ten pence fine. Aaron was "gated" for two days for leaving the school grounds without a big kid or staff to look after

him. He stuffed his chewing gum back in his mouth, looked sulky and said nothing.

"Any other business?"

Jasper saw the woman visitor's hand wiggling above the bannisters.

"Charlotte."

"I'm here for a couple of weeks to do some interviews with Muir for his hundredth birthday. Is it OK if I tape the meeting next week - is that all right?"

"I expect so," the chairman said. "All in favour that Charlotte can tape the meeting next week?" Most hands went up. "All against?"

Muir raised a shaky arm and spoke. "You guys are too generous. A tape can fall into anybody's hands. With you lot swearing and talking about your love life, once The Sun got hold of it, the school could get closed."

"Muir, the meeting's been taped loads of times," the chairman said kindly. "We know Charlotte, she's an ex-pupil for God's sake. Anyway, it was overwhelmingly carried. Business closed."

"Ombudsmen," said someone.

"Oh yeah. Who wants to be ombudsmen next week?"

Simon and Katie put up their hands as well as Kevin, the maths teacher. The secretary wrote their names down.

"OK, meeting closed."

Maz stuffed his knitting under his arm, scrambled one-handedly up a ladder in a corner of the room and turned a switch. There was an electronic buzz. A fusillade of bass guitar and drums ricocheted startlingly round the lounge. Some kids wandered out of the French windows into the warm evening air. Katie and Simon walked towards each other and started moving to the music.

Muir tamped out his pipe and put it in the pocket of his baggy corduroy jacket. Half-supported by two of the bigger girls, he made his way over to rescue Jasper. "Come over to the cottage

for a whisky," he shouted in a hoarse whisper, cupping a paper-thin hand over his mouth and leaning perilously towards him.

* * *

If you don't live, you die, and if you don't die, you live. The choice seemed stark to Muir. Living he had his stiff joints to contend with; what he called his century itch - a kind of scratchy, tingling sensation over his skin as if it were allergic to the pressure of air; the mornings, when he would wake monotonously early and drift into a snoring, uneasy doze while he waited for someone to come and haul him out of bed and shuffle him to the bathroom for his pee, which never seemed to be the full satisfying gush it had been. It was as if his bladder had dried out like an ancient stream across a rock, the source mysteriously retreated in against itself. As for his penis having any other function, he had difficulty some days recalling the concept of sex, the spike of adrenalin, the stiffening of flesh. Perhaps, he thought, that itch of his was the diaspora of his sexual urge, spread and trickled over his whole crinkled body, causing his skin to prickle and irritate pointlessly rather than concentrating itself into one erect wholesome desire. Perhaps it scattered off you like dandruff when you died, made the ground itch, grew into trees . . .

His head jerked up - he'd been dozing in the old grey armchair again.

Then there was death - a consummation devoutly to be wished, Hamlet had opined. He couldn't think of it like that. A nothingness. After all this time he was afraid of nothingness, leaving everything, never knowing how things turned out. What things? How could anything "turn out"? He would have liked a third option, a sort of flying eye, a watching brief without any direct involvement. Something that didn't include the weariness of struggling far too often to have a tiny pee, to get to a chair, the

utter boredom of the hundred thousandth time of washing his hands, maybe the millionth time of a word, any word, say the word "I", dribbling weakly through the divide of his lips, without anyone actually understanding who "I" was, what "I" meant. A third state would be the thing, an option you could take to hang around without this hideous shape that had settled on him like an unironed, scratchy blanket. If one could have believed . . . but that would entail so much bullshit, make a nonsense of his entire life, let in all sorts of ridiculous notions - received truth, original sin . . .

"Muir. Muir?" An anxious voice. He felt a hand on his knee. It had no quality. "Muir, are you all right? Can I get you something? A little more Scotch?"

He started and opened his eyes. "Why not -" he couldn't remember the name " - laddie? Just a wee dram." He found he often lapsed into this music-hall Scots which had been normal when he was himself a laddie.

"It's Jasper Bignold." The voice identified itself. "You were telling me about future plans, for when. . ."

"Aye, I dropped off."

"I think it's time I went. I'll come over again tomorrow if I may."

Muir blinked up at him. He was struggling hard to remember who he was, to place the lightly uneasy feeling he had about the man's presence here.

"You're the... inspector chappie?"

"Yes, but just an informal visit, just interest really."

Muri noticed the swift reassurance and felt more uneasy.

"Och weel. Comfortable are you, over there in the terrace?"

"Yes, fine." Jasper backed towards the door. "I'll find you tomorrow then."

"I hope so laddie."

Jasper made his way in the dark across the front lawn towards the pair of terraced cottages on the edge of the school grounds

where visitors were accommodated. He guessed Charlotte would stay for the dancing. He also guessed she would be sleeping in the next house. He couldn't face her tonight.