The Exercise
by Bernard MacLaverty

“We never got the chance,” his mother would say to him. “It wouldn’t have done me much good but your father could have bettered himself. He’d be teaching or something now instead of serving behind a bar. He could stand up with the best of them.”

Now that he had started grammar school Kevin’s father joined him in his work, helping him when he had the time, sometimes doing the exercises out of the text books on his own before he went to bed. He worked mainly from examples in the Maths and Language books or from previously corrected work of Kevin’s. Often his wife took a hand out of him saying, “Do you think you’ll pass your Christmas Tests?”

When he concentrated he sat hunched at the kitchen table, his non-writing hand shoved down the back of his trousers and his tongue stuck out.

“Put that thing back in your mouth,” Kevin’s mother would say, laughing. “You’ve a tongue on you like a cow.”

His father smelt strongly of tobacco for he smoked both a pipe and cigarettes. When he gave Kevin money for sweets he’d say, “You’ll get sixpence in my coat pocket on the banisters.”

Kevin would dig into the pocket deep down almost to his elbow and pull out a handful of coins speckled with bits of yellow and black tobacco. His father also smelt of porter, not his breath, for he never drank but from his clothes and Kevin thought it mixed nicely with his grown up smell. He loved to smell his pyjama jacket and the shirts he left off for washing.

Once in a while Kevin’s father would come in at six o’clock, sit in his armchair and say, “Slippers.”

“You’re not staying in, are you?” The three boys shouted and danced around, the youngest pulling off his big boots, falling back on the floor as they came away from his feet, Kevin, the eldest, standing on the arm of the chair to get the slippers down from the cupboard.
“Some one of you get a good shovel of coal for that fire,” and they sat in the warm kitchen doing their homework, their father reading the paper or moving about doing some job their mother had been at him to do for months. Before their bedtime he would read the younger ones a story or if there were no books in the house at the time he would choose a piece from the paper. Kevin listened with the others although he pretended to be doing something else.

But it was not one of those nights. His father stood shaving with his overcoat on, a very heavy navy overcoat, in a great hurry, his face creamed thick with white lather. Kevin knelt on the cold lino of the bathroom floor, one elbow leaning on the padded seat of the green wicker chair trying to get help with his Latin. It was one of those exercises which asked for the nominative and genitive of: an evil deed, a wise father and so on.

“What’s the Latin for ‘evil’?”

His father towered above him trying to get at the mirror, pointing his chin upwards scraping underneath.

“Look it up at the back.”

Kevin sucked the end of his pencil and fumbled through the vocabularies. His father finished shaving, humped his back and spluttered in the basin. Kevin heard him pull the plug and the final gasp as the water escaped. He groped for the towel then genuflected beside him drying his face.

“Where is it?” He looked down still drying slower and slower, meditatively until he stopped.

“I’ll tell you just this once because I’m in a hurry.”

Kevin stopped sucking the pencil and held it poised, ready and wrote the answers with great speed into his jotter as his father called them out.

“Is that them all?” his father asked, draping the towel over the side of the bath. He leaned forward to kiss Kevin but the boy lowered his head to look at something in the book. As his father rushed down the stairs he shouted back over his shoulder.

“Don’t ever ask me to do that again. You’ll have to work them out for yourself.”

He was away leaving Kevin sitting at the chair. The towel edged its way slowly down the side of the bath and fell on the floor. He got up and looked in the wash-hand basin.
The bottom was covered in short black hairs, shavings. He drew a white path through them with his finger. Then he turned and went down the stairs to copy the answers in ink.

Of all the teachers in the school Waldo was the one who commanded the most respect. In his presence nobody talked, with the result that he walked the corridors in a moat of silence. Boys seeing him approach would drop their voices to a whisper and only when he was out of earshot would they speak normally again. Between classes there was always five minutes uproar. The boys wrestled over desks, shouted, whistled, flung books while some tried to learn their nouns, eyes closed, feet tapping to the rhythm of declensions. Others put frantic finishing touches to last night’s exercise. Some minutes before Waldo’s punctual arrival, the class quietened. Three rows of boys, all by now strumming nouns, sat hunched and waiting.

Waldo’s entrance was theatrical. He strode in with strides as long as his soutane would permit, his books clenched in his left hand and pressed tightly against his chest. With his right hand he swung the door behind him, closing it with a crash. His eyes raked the class. If, as occasionally happened, it did not close properly he did not turn from the class but backed slowly against the door snapping it shut with his behind. Two strides brought him to the rostrum. He cracked his books down with an explosion and made a swift palm upward gesture.

Waldo was very tall, his height being emphasised by the soutane, narrow and tight-fitting at the shoulders, sweeping down like a bell to the floor. A row of black gleaming buttons bisected him from floor to throat. When he talked his Adam’s apple hit against the hard, white Roman collar and created in Kevin the same sensation as a fingernail scraping down the blackboard. His face was sallow and immobile. (There was a rumour that he had a glass eye but no-one knew which. Nobody could look at him long enough because to meet his stare was to invite a question.) He abhorred slovenliness. Once when presented with an untidy exercise book, dog-eared with a tea ring on the cover, he picked it up, the corner of one leaf between his finger and thumb, the pages splaying out like a fan, opened the window and dropped it three floors to the ground. His own neatness became exaggerated when he was at the board, writing in copperplate script just large enough for the boy in the back row to read – geometrical columns of declined nouns defined by exact, invisible margins. When he had finished he would set the chalk down and rub the used finger and thumb together with the same action he used after handling the host over the paten.
The palm upward gesture brought the class to its feet and they said the Hail Mary in Latin. While it was being said all eyes looked down because they knew if they looked up Waldo was bound to be staring at them.

“Exercises.”

When Waldo was in a hurry he corrected the exercises verbally, asking one boy for the answers and then asking all those who got it right to put up their hands. It was four for anyone who lied about his answer and now and then he would take spot checks to find out the liars.

“Hold it, hold it there,” he would say and leap from the rostrum, moving through the forest of hands and look at each boy’s book, tracing out the answer with the tip of his cane. Before the end of the round and while his attention was on one book a few hands would be lowered quietly. Today he was in a hurry. The atmosphere was tense as he looked from one boy to another, deciding who would start.

“Sweeny, we'll begin with you.” Kevin rose to his feet, his finger trembling under the place in the book. He read the first answer and looked up. Waldo remained impassive. He would let someone while translating unseens ramble on and on with great imagination until he faltered, stopped and admitted that he didn't know. Then and only then would he be slapped.

“Two, nominative. Sapienter Pater.” Kevin went on haltingly through the whole ten and stopped, waiting for a comment from Waldo. It was a long time before he spoke. When he did it was with bored annoyance.

“Every last one of them is wrong.”

“But sir, Father, they couldn’t be wr . . .” Kevin said it with such conviction, blurted it out so quickly that Waldo looked at him in surprise.

“Why not?”

“Because my . . .” Kevin stopped.

“Well?” Waldo's stone face resting on his knuckles. “Because my what?”

It was too late to turn back now.

“Because my father said so,” he mumbled very low, chin on chest.

“Speak up, let us all hear you.” Some of the boys had heard and he thought they sniggered.
“Because my father said so.” This time the commotion in the class was obvious.

“And where does your father teach Latin?” There was no escape. Waldo had him. He knew now there would be an exhibition for the class. Kevin placed his weight on his arm and felt his tremble communicated to the desk.

“He doesn’t, Father.”

“And what does he do?”

Kevin hesitated, stammering,

“He’s a barman.”

“A barman!” Waldo mimicked and the class roared loudly.

“Quiet.” He wheeled on them. “You, Sweeny. Come out here.” He reached inside the breast of his soutane and with a flourish produced a thin yellow cane, whipping it back and forth, testing it.

Kevin walked out to the front of the class, his face fiery red, the blood throbbing in his ears. He held out his hand. Waldo raised it higher, more to his liking, with the tip of the cane touching the underside of the upturned palm. He held it there for some time.

“If your brilliant father continues to do your homework for you, Sweeny, you’ll end up a barman yourself.” Then he whipped the cane down expertly across the tips of his fingers and again just as the blood began to surge back into them. Each time the cane in its follow-through cracked loudly against the skirts of his soutane.

“You could have made a better job of it yourself. Other hand.” The same ritual of raising and lowering the left hand with the tip of the cane to the desired height. “After all, I have taught you some Latin.” Crack. “It would be hard to do any worse.”

Kevin went back to his place resisting a desire to hug his hands under his armpits and stumbled on a schoolbag jutting into the aisle as he pushed into his desk. Again Waldo looked round the class and said, “Now we’ll have it right from someone.”

The class continued and Kevin nursed his fingers, out of the fray.

As the bell rang Waldo gathered up his books and said, “Sweeny, I want a word with you outside. Ave Maria, gratia plena . . .” It was not until the end of the corridor that Waldo turned to face him. He looked at Kevin and maintained his silence for a moment.
“Sweeny, I must apologise to you.” Kevin bowed his head. “I meant your father no harm—he's probably a good man, a very good man.”

“Yes, sir,” said Kevin. The pain in his fingers had gone.

“Look at me when I'm talking, please.” Kevin looked at his collar, his Adam's apple, then his face. It relaxed for a fraction and Kevin thought he was almost going to smile, but he became efficient, abrupt again.

“All right, very good, you may go back to your class.”

“Yes Father,” Kevin nodded and moved back along the empty corridor.

Some nights when he had finished his homework early he would go down to meet his father coming home from work. It was dark, October, and he stood close against the high wall at the bus-stop trying to shelter from the cutting wind. His thin black blazer with the school emblem on the breast pocket and his short grey trousers, both new for starting grammar school, did little to keep him warm. He stood shivering, his hands in his trouser pockets and looked down at his knees which were blue and marbled, quivering uncontrollably. It was six o'clock when he left the house and he had been standing for fifteen minutes. Traffic began to thin out and the buses became less regular, carrying fewer and fewer passengers. There was a moment of silence when there was no traffic and he heard a piece of paper scraping along on pointed edges. He kicked it as it passed him. He thought of what had happened, of Waldo and his father. On the first day in class Waldo had picked out many boys by their names.

“Yes, I know your father well,” or “I taught your elder brother. A fine priest he's made. Next.”

“Sweeny, Father.”

“Sweeny? Sweeny? – You're not Dr John's son, are you?”

“No Father.”

“Or anything to do with the milk people?”

“No Father.”

“Next.” He passed on without further comment.

Twenty-five past six. Another bus turned the corner and Kevin saw his father standing on the platform. He moved forward to the stop as the bus slowed down. His father jumped lightly off and saw Kevin waiting for him. He clipped him over the head with the tightly
rolled newspaper he was carrying.

“How are you big lad?”

“All right,” said Kevin shivering. He humped his shoulders and set off beside his father, bumping into him uncertainly as he walked.

“How did it go today?” his father asked.

“All right.” They kept silent until they reached the corner of their own street.

“What about the Latin?”

Kevin faltered, feeling a babyish desire to cry.

“How was it?”

“OK. Fine.”

“Good. I was a bit worried about it. It was done in a bit of a rush. Son, your Da’s a genius.” He smacked him with the paper again. Kevin laughed and slipped his hand into the warmth of his father’s overcoat pocket, deep to the elbow.

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