

Martin Cooper



Dandelion
Sky

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Sky

stories by

Martin Cooper

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Another one for Clare



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Fulcrum

Dough Boy blew across the pen top, producing a mournful bottleneck moan like the lost whooping of owls in October. The teacher ignored the sound. She was annotating a World War I poem projected onto the interactive whiteboard, talking as she did so.

*“To these I turn, in these I trust –
Brother Lead and Sister Steel”*

She underlined words in red, blue and green, circled a phrase, added a comment in the margin. The girls in the class made notes. The boys inked graffiti shapes on the table tops, stared out of the windows. One or two nearby eyes flickered towards Dough Boy and away again.

This was the bit he loved best. He stood on the fire step of the trench, watch in hand, whistle between his lips, ready to give the command. Nothing had happened yet. Nothing

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would unless the teacher chose to acknowledge the interruption. This was the moment of balance, the fulcrum on which the battle swung. Later there might be reprimands, shouting, detentions, another line in his report card, but for the moment these things hung in the air. The sun shone through the glass. Drawings on the walls curled. The teacher's voice rose and fell.

Fŭl'crum, n. (pl. -ra). (Mech.) point against which lever is placed to get purchase or on which it turns or is supported; means by which influence etc. is brought to bear [L, = post of couch (*fulcire* to prop)]

Dough Boy understood words like fulcrum. He used them himself, though not in public. Secure in his own head, where jibes could not reach, he thought: "This is the fulcrum. Things could go either way. My hand is on the lever." The cross hair of his sniper sight traversed distant defences. The young woman standing at the front of the room continued writing and talking, a target tattooed on her spine.

Outside on the sports field a play battle surged the length of the rugby pitch, white against red. From the vantage point of a first floor classroom it was a pleasant sight. Pleasant from any vantage point which was not at the fag end of the line,

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lumbering towards the distant posts, chest burning, heart pounding, thighs chafing. The necklace of coloured shirts formed and re-formed, accelerating forward over the grass like an arc of surf rushing up the sand. A teacher in a blue track suit kept pace, gesticulating and yelling encouragement.

“A fractal pattern,” Dough Boy said to himself. “I think.”

His dictionary was an old one, printed in 1964 and given to him by his grandfather. The appendix of abbreviations at the back included LP, but cassette and compact disc were nowhere to be found. A computer was an electronic calculating machine, a PC was a police constable. Digital had to do with fingers. The babble of the last forty years passed him by.

He was familiar, though, with the jargon of earlier generations. Voices from the past spoke to him from the page and the words piled up in his mind like drifts of leaves against a garden wall. He prowled the cantonments of India with Kipling’s three comrades, yarning of sergeants and dogs and colonels’ daughters. He tramped with the fugitive Hannay across moors and along glens, with steep hills all about him. The phrases that sounded in his ears most recently belonged to the young men who vanished into the mud of Flanders. He knew what a cushy one was, and a whizz-bang and a coal bucket. Breathing hoarsely through open mouth he pored over drawings and photographs to find examples of sandbag traverse, sap and listening post.

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Trench sounds were familiar too: the faint plop of the German mortar; the ping of a rifle bullet striking the barbed wire and tumbling away into the woods behind the lines; the mad minute of artillery before the attack.

His collection of books was built out of the trawlings of charity shops and jumble sales. Spines were torn, corners were bumped and there were cup rings on the covers. They were walking wounded, but at least they stood upright. Dough Boy's grandfather, whose own grandfather had served in Mesopotamia, held a strongly-expressed prejudice against publications with floppy covers. "That's not a book," he would snort. "It's an obese pamphlet." Dough Boy approved. Words, he felt, should take up space.

Obēse', **a.** Corpulent. So obēs'ITY n. [f. L OB
(*esus* p.p., = having eaten, of *ēdere* eat)]

There were up to date dictionaries in the school library, of course. Editions in several volumes and printed on fine paper that rustled as you turned the pages. He could have spent entire lessons tracing chains of words from column to column were it not for the mockery he knew would follow if any of his classmates spotted him. Even the public library was risky. It was a small town. Sometimes he bunked off to spend a games afternoon there, reassured by the thought of

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his fellow students still immersed in the steamy fug of the changing room.

People, apparently, should not take up space.

“After the war Sassoon was reluctant to allow the poem to be published. Anyone suggest why?”

Dough Boy blew across the pen top again, gently this time. Somewhere beyond the broken horizon a mile-long troop train ground through the night. Sparks from the fire box whipped behind and cavorted along its wake. In the cars the soldiers slept, curled around their packs, shoulders hunched in anticipation of the sergeant’s boot. The engine’s whistle echoed among buddleia-sprouting ruins. A feral cat lifted its head.

The teacher stopped writing and turned. She stood, one arm akimbo, the other elbow propped on jutting hip, board marker dangling from fingers. Dough boy felt his skin crisp like pork crackling under the ancient feminine stare. She waited a precisely timed, posed moment then turned back to the board, no word spoken. Behind him someone tittered.

“Nice move,” thought Dough Boy. A minor skirmish, night patrol in no man’s land. The enemy sent up a flare. In the dark afterwards bullets hissed low through the grass. We stood and walked back to the lines. Better a shattered ankle than one in the head.

It was a girl thing. None of the male teachers could do it.

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A look of scorn, of approval withdrawn, that echoed down the millennia. He did not need a dictionary to interpret it. His glands got the message.

Akim'bō, adv. (Of the arms) with hands on hips & elbows turned outwards. [in 15th c. *in kenebowe*, later *on kenbow*, a *kenbow*, of unkn. orig.]

“Where do girls learn to do that?” he wondered. Not from their mothers, surely? He thought of his own mother. No. They must pick it up from each other, watching friends and older sisters. Did they practice, standing in line to thrust at swinging, straw-filled dummies? Hardly. Far too sweaty. It came naturally, part of their essential girlness. They drew on a deep inner well of scorn. They handed white feathers to strangers in the street. Did they ever picture the rags lying in the shell holes?

Dough Boy blew across the pen top for a third time.

“If you don’t put that down, Jonathan, I’ll shove it so far up your nose it’ll get tangled in your tonsils.” The teacher still had her back to the class. She spoke in a conversational tone, without turning round, without a break in the flow of the red capitals. She reached the end of the sentence, read it through with her head on one side, added an exclamation

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mark. Then she turned and addressed him directly.

“*Quail from your downward darting kiss...*’ Come on, Jonathan. What do you think Sassoon means?”

Dough Boy could not move. The lever had slipped from his hand. The train rushed through the dark while he slumbered on. He felt the other students behind him, on either side. The silent pressure of their derision swelled around him and his thoughts curled against the shoves and the taunts, just as later, trapped in the corridor after the lesson, his thick body would turn away. *Come on, Jonathan, what does it mean? Tell us, Dough Boy, tell us.*

But the words were too much for him. They always were. They willed themselves spoken.

“It’s a metaphor, Miss.”

“Good. The downward darting kiss is a horrible metaphor for the bayonet thrust. Do you think he meant it? Is Sassoon glorifying the slaughter of war, or is the poem ironic?”

“Neither, Miss.”

“What then?”

“I think it’s an angry poem, Miss.”

“OK. You think the barbarity and the waste of the killing made him angry?”

“No, Miss. In a book I read it said he wrote the poem after a lecture on bayonet fighting. I think he was angry because he enjoyed it.”

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Mět'aphor, n. Application of name or descriptive term to an object to which it is not literally applicable (e.g. *a glaring error*); instance of this; *mixed* ~, combination of inconsistent ~. Hence mětapho'rical a., mětapho'ricallY adv. [f. F *metaphore* or L f. Gk *metaphora* f. META(*phero* bear) transfer]

The class were on their feet as soon as the bell rang, dismissed and swarming towards the next lesson. A couple of girls stopped to talk to the teacher, who answered their question, broke off to shout a reminder about coursework at departing backs, lowered her voice and spoke some more. Dough Boy gathered his scattered belongings. He pushed the top back on his pen, taking his time. The girls turned to go. He rooted in his bag, looking for something. Anything would do. The teacher spoke to him, as he knew she would, too soon. From the door one of the girls glanced back, listening.

“Sorry if you found the lesson boring, Jonathan.”

“Didn't, Miss,” he mumbled.

“That was a very interesting idea. About the poet being angry with himself.” *Very in-ter-est-ing, Dough Boy. What a clever tub of lard you are.*

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“You’re going to get an A star in the summer, you know that as well as I do. So what’s all this business with the whistling?”

She smelled of bath soap. Dough Boy looked at his feet, said nothing.

“It isn’t clever, you know. In fact it makes you look a complete dimwit.” *Dim-wit Dough Boy.*

“Yes, Miss.”

“Oh, go on. You’ll be late.”

Dough Boy shoved his books into his bag, swung it over one shoulder and made his way to the door. The background rumble of the guns swelled to meet him. It was like a leaden throbbing in the jaw, masked by busy routine but ballooning to overwhelm every moment of tranquillity.

The conscript climbed the steps of the dugout to meet the barrage.



Alternative

Stephen Clarke was twice the man I'll ever be. I didn't know him well. I spoke to him most days – I worked for him, after all. I had a pint with him occasionally. I fancied his wife, of course. But I didn't really *know* him. So it was a bit of a surprise when I was invited to his funeral.

Charlie went, obviously. But he was Stephen's partner, so you'd expect that. I saw him at the church. Our pews were on opposite sides of the aisle and I nodded and smiled in a mournful kind of way.

Stephen had been found at five o'clock on a Wednesday morning lying in the office car park under a pile of scaffolding.

There was nothing mysterious about the scaffolding. They were building a penthouse on the roof, all glass and chrome according to the drawings. Somewhere to impress the punters. A metal pole will do quite a lot of damage from any height, but from six floors up it is usually lethal. On Tuesday

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evening a dozen of them had been left ready for the next day and not properly secured. Charlie was already suing the pants off the building contractors.

Nor was there anything odd about the fact that Stephen's body lay in the car park for eight hours before anyone noticed it. Our offices are built on three sides of a square with executive parking in the middle. The open end of the horseshoe faces the road but there are trees and shrubs screening it. Charlie is very proud of the place. The partnership started in his garage.

What was strange was that Stephen was at the office at all. We were used to him dropping in at any time of the day or night, staying 48 hours at a stretch sometimes. He would work surrounded by whiteboards and discarded polystyrene cups, while Charlie waited to field practical applications before they spun off into the long grass. Once Stephen tried to explain his current obsession to me. Something about two-dimensional strings and supersymmetry, I understood one word in ten.

But that Tuesday night he was supposed to be in the Caribbean.

His wife Simone told me later that they set out on the Sunday afternoon and got as far as the airport. She had persuaded him to leave his BlackBerry on his desk. Stephen went to buy a newspaper and the next thing she knew the

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trip was off. He had to get back to the house immediately. He shut himself in his study for two days and on the second night he went in to work.

He turned up on my doormat about a month after the funeral.

It was getting on for ten o'clock in the evening. I was debugging a piece of code we'd been having trouble with, wishing Stephen was still around to deal with it because he'd written the stuff in the first place, and thinking about listening to the news while I made some more coffee. OK, I know it isn't healthy to take your work home in the evening. The security guys would have fits if they knew. But I'm a sad individual and if they don't disable the USB ports on the workstations of course people are going to stick things in them, it's only natural.

I was in the kitchen tamping espresso into the filter when the doorbell rang, and there he was.

"You're dead." I said.

"That's right." He grinned. "Are you going to let me in?"

He wandered into the living room looking around him as if everything were new, dropped his coat over the back of a chair, peered at the screen of my laptop and grinned again.

"Nice place. Have I been here before?"

"No."

"Ah, fine. Didn't think so."

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It is a nice place. When I was headhunted I got a good deal: car, share options, golden hello, the lot. I can afford it. Also, I have nobody else to please, so I please myself.

Stephen inspected my sound system, riffled through my collection of Hendrix on vinyl and threw himself down on the sofa. None of his limbs dropped off. No maggots were shaken loose from his hair. In fact his hair looked tidy and expensively cut, as it always did.

He must have seen what I was thinking, because he bared his teeth.

“No pointy ones, see?”

Not undead either, then. In fact, he was looking remarkably well for someone who'd been underground for four weeks: fit, tanned and bright-eyed, hands freshly manicured, no sign of earth under the finger nails.

“Going to offer me a drink?” he said.

“I was just making some coffee.”

“Scotch would be better. Especially some of that malt you like. Oh, forget the work – if anyone can do it, it's you. Get some glasses and pour.”

So I got two glasses and poured, while he asked after people at the office, cracked an off-colour joke about one of the clients, made small talk as if he'd been out of the country for a fortnight or two. As he should have been.

“Got off with Simone yet?”

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“Of course not.”

“Really? I was sure you would. She’s got her eye on you.”

“Last time I saw her – which was at your funeral, incidentally – she seemed a bit preoccupied.”

“Hm.” Stephen scowled and put down his drink. Then he leaned forward, elbows on knees, hands clasped in front of him.

“There’s no easy way to explain this, Jonathan, so I’ll dive right in. You know what I’ve been working on – in general terms, I mean? Bilateral membranes and all the rest of it...? Well... It’s real. I have experimental proof.

“The Stephen Clarke you know is dead. He was buried a month ago. This is a different me. I didn’t go back to the office that night, didn’t walk under that scaffolding. You might say I’m the alternative.”

Now I’ve watched my share of *Star Trek* episodes. *Babylon 5*, *Stargate*, *The Twilight Zone*, you name it. *It is life Captain, but not as we know it*. Plus, I was a games developer for years. I can do the jargon.

“Don’t suppose we’re talking clone here, are we...?” I said. “No, maths is your field, not biology. What is it? Parallel universes? Alternate realities?”

“You should take this seriously.” He held my eyes for a beat, then reached to refresh his glass. “Parallel, alternate... call it what you like. But it turns out there are two – and

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only two. Binary. 0 and 1. Here and there. This one and that one.”

At the airport, he told me, he had looked at a newspaper and seen the light.

“*News of the World* or *Observer*?”

“As a matter of fact it was *The Sunday Telegraph*. It doesn’t matter. It was a flaw in the printing. The corner of the page had been folded over in the press and there was a blank space underneath, a perfect white triangle. Only a few lines missing, and only in one copy. The next one in the pile was fine.”

I knew what he meant. I recognised that flash of insight. It was the high that made it all worthwhile. The rest was colouring in the spaces. I wrote my first game after watching a fly buzzing against a sunlit window. Made money out of it too. Not as much as I should have done, but I was only 14. You think you know everything when you’re 14 years old, but you don’t.

“This one and that one,” I said. “Why are you telling me?”

Stephen jumped up and began pacing on my Afghan.

“This is a second chance,” he said. “Whoever had one of those before? Most of the maths is in my head at the moment – I can firm everything up... publish... It’ll change *everything*... But I can see that it might be a bit of a shock.”

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“Could be. The law on inheritance will need re-writing for a start.”

“There, you see? I knew you’d get it. I knew I should come to you first. You’re pragmatic.”

There was more of the same. We agreed to talk again and he left at about one in the morning.

I’m a more impulsive person than Stephen. My flat is on the third floor and it wasn’t difficult. Much easier than the scaffolding pipes. He went down the stairwell without a murmur; perhaps a surprised look as he fell past the second floor landing. Getting rid of the body took some thought, but he’d already been buried once. Nobody was expecting another one.

When Charlie offered me the partnership I haggled for a while, but it was only for the look of the thing. As Simone says, life is not a rehearsal. You only get one go. *Carpe diem*.

If you've enjoyed these stories, you may also like Martin Cooper's novel *Cold Hillside*. It can be obtained from:

Amazon.co.uk
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What reviewers had to say about *Cold Hillside*:

Sometimes I'll read a book and think, "I wish I could write that well." Cold Hillside is one of those books... Mr. Cooper likes to skip around in time and tense, a juggler tossing up a new ball without fanfare, until you realize he's got eight or ten in the air, and all you can do is applaud.

Good Book Alert

A successful merger of crime novel and literary style.

Booked Up

Cold Hillside is the kind of book that demonstrates just why self publishing is beginning to really take off in the current publishing climate. With the bigger publishing houses currently focussing on genres and ideas that are proven best-sellers (the Dan Brown-style thriller, the supernatural teen romance), there is little room for books that deviate from the fashions of the moment. Self publishing allows books like Cold Hillside, which don't fit so easily into genres and sales patterns, to find a readership. And this book deserves a readership.

Agrippina Legit