



'Teeth' by Silke Dale Brosig | Orwell Youth Prize Winner 2019 (Junior Prize)

“But how can you think that it’s fair?”

“Private school students get higher grades, so they get into more top universities. There’s nothing unfair about it.” He explains this in the tone of somebody talking to a small child, slow and sympathetic, but his pale eyes flash with an arrogant triumph. I know his type, and I know what he’s thinking, too: Scholarship kid, doesn’t know the first thing about the real world. Naïve, that’s all.

Beneath the table, my hands curl into fists, tight and charged with impotent anger. There have been too many of these conversations, over the lunch table or in History class or on Facebook after I share an article highlighting the devastating effects of austerity. I have talked in circles too many times, sometimes with different boys but they’re all the same, underneath the flashy clothing. Most of them have parents who are university professors or the owners of pharmaceutical companies; they travel abroad three times a year and have never even seen a council house and shoplift even though they know they could pay.

Sometimes I think that I will never fit in with these boys, these boys who have never been told no. I make good grades and save up for expensive clothes, but my stubborn Mancunian accent will always betray the fact that we come from different worlds. No matter how eloquent a point I make, my voice will always meet sniggers amongst their upper-class drawls.

These are boys who have never set foot in a state school. In primary they learnt Latin and horseriding in class sizes of ten and went to Rome or Paris as an “after-SATs treat”. Yet still, they are convinced that they aren’t truly rich, because they have spent their entire lives in a comfortable chamber where everyone lives in houses with seven-figure price tags.

My experience was different. Before the scholarship, I went to a school in which many of my classmates arrived without having eaten breakfast, armed with a single packet of crisps for their lunch. Those children never had the same opportunities for learning that I did – and certainly not those available to the private-school boys I am surrounded by now. Most of my classmates’ parents had never been to college, let alone university, and some didn’t speak a word of English. Many of



them didn't own a single book. How could anyone expect them to achieve at the same level as people who have been handed everything?

One memory of my primary school is still vivid in my mind, five years later. When I was ten, our school had a "tooth-brushing programme": we were all given a small orange pouch containing a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste, and were expected to brush our teeth after eating our packed lunches. Oral health of children in our area was, apparently, appalling. It was only later, years later, that I understood why: many of my classmates didn't have a toothbrush of their own.

Some older children were selected to help the younger ones with their daily tooth-brushing, and as the official "golden child" of my class, I was chosen for this duty. I enjoyed it thoroughly – I was always shy around children my own age but would happily chat with the four- and five-year-olds to whom I was assigned. I fetched them from the yard where they were playing, asked them how they were doing, and led them by hand to the bathroom where they brushed their teeth. This was my favourite part of the day.

And my favourite child was Lucas. He was a tubby, cheerful five-year-old with a shaved head and freckles. He liked to tell jokes, and little stories – none of them made much sense but they were delivered with such conviction that I always ended up laughing. He was bright and confident, and I always looked forward to seeing him.

It took me a few weeks to notice about his teeth. He smiled often – he was an incredibly happy child – but somehow I never looked too carefully at the detail. He was able to brush his teeth independently, so I didn't have to pay much attention as he did so. But one afternoon, as Lucas was in the middle of an animated retelling of Little Red Riding Hood, a story he had learned in class, he laughed, mouth wide open, and I saw it. His young teeth were entirely black.

That image – the beaming child with a mouth full of rot – is fixed in my mind. Whenever a rich boy tells me how "people in poverty don't really suffer", all I can think of is that boy and how his health was damaged by the poverty in which he lived. I think of all the children I knew, the children I grew up with, who were talented and intelligent and ambitious but never had the chance to stretch their abilities.



Now, I look up at the boy sat across from me, the satisfied smirk still written across his face, and see his teeth glinting white. I realise that all his life he has been taught to stifle every ounce of empathy he may feel for the poor. He has been taught to believe that they are lazy, stupid, that he was simply born to be better than they are, because otherwise he would be weighed down by a constant, crushing sense of guilt about the ways in which they are forced to live.

My fists unfurl. The balloon of anger that was swelling in my stomach begins to deflate, and all I can feel towards him is a soft pity. The idea of not being able to afford basic necessities – a meal, a schoolbook, a toothbrush – is almost incomprehensible to him. He has learnt to see kindness as naïvete, compassion as weakness. It must be lonely.

What does he know of fairness?