

THE MS TAN TALES • BOOK ONE

COMING UP IN THE NEXT EPISODE...

Right, Year 8 - safety specs **ON** before
anyone touches that pillar drill!

DESIGN FICTION

Design fiction is a way
of imagining and creating
products, or ideas
for the future to help
us think about how new
technologies might
change lives



MS TAN

TEACHER OF DESIGN & TECHNOLOGY

A post-industrial Midlands academy.
A D&T teacher trying something
unproven. A thirteen-year-old at
the back bench who notices
everything. One term, told one
Wednesday at a time.

WRITTEN BY



kyōshi

OK Kitsuune

Coming up in the next episode...

The Ms Tan Tales • Book One

Coming up in the next episode...

The debut novel by

OK Kitsune

2026



Coming up in the next episode...

The first in the series of The Ms Tan Tales

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Coming up in the next episode...

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The Blurb

Coming up in the next episode...

The Ms Tan Tales, Book One

The first thing you need to know is that there was no keyring.

Every Year 8 at Shining Academy knows how design and technology works. You get a rotation, you get a scheme of work, and at the end of it you take home a small wooden object nobody wants. Violet Jones has been counting on this. Violet Jones has, broadly, been counting on being unimpressed by everything.

Instead, she gets Ms Tan, a persona card with a stranger's name on it, and a fictional town in 2050 where a woman called Deb Hargreaves works a shift she cannot afford to lose and has nowhere safe to keep the one thing she owns that matters. No steps. No worksheet. No correct first move. For Violet, an open brief with no edges isn't boring; it's the worst thing a lesson can be.

Then, somewhere around the third Wednesday, entirely without her permission, it starts to work.

Eight lessons. Eight episodes. A workshop that smells of MDF dust and machine oil, a technician with a drawer of felt in colours nobody else would have kept, a best friend building a shrine for a dead man called Aled, and a head of department who signed off a scheme of work in September and has just put his head round the door to find out what's actually happening in it.

Violet notices everything; the tone under the tone, the sentence someone almost says and then swallows, the half-second two adults hold eye contact too long in front of an audience of children. It is, she is coming to accept, the central fact of her personality.

What she doesn't notice, until it's more or less already happened, is that she has started to care about something.

Funny, precise and quietly furious about the right things, *'Coming up in the next episode...'* is a novel about a term of ordinary Wednesday mornings, and about what a subject is for when nobody's counting it anymore.

The Ms Tan Tales: series description

Greencutting used to make things. Shears, billhooks, plane blades: the unglamorous cutlery of work rather than the dinner table. Now the drop-forge is a gym, the last edge-tool works is a retail park, and the old comprehensive has been re-clad, re-branded and absorbed into the Bright Lights Trust, which has a data dashboard for everything and a mission statement on the corridor walls.

In what's left of the Design and Technology Department (half its curriculum time gone, its workshop older than most of its staff), Ms Tan is trying something her colleagues would rather she didn't. No keyrings. No phone stands. Nothing you can put a number against by Friday. Just thirty Year 8s, a fictional town in 2050, and a term spent learning what it actually means to design something for someone else.

Violet Jones, thirteen, is not impressed. Violet is watchful, dry, allergic to being managed, and has spent a year and a half being broadly unimpressed by everything this school has asked of her. She is also, though she'd never put it this way, the only person in the room paying proper attention; to the work, to the adults, and to the quiet argument going on above her head about what her subject is even for.

Each book is one term, told as episodes: one lesson, one Wednesday morning at a time, the way a school drama used to fill a

Tuesday-evening slot and the way a scheme of work is supposed to build; not eight unrelated hours, but one thing, constructed in eight instalments.

Funny, sharp-eyed and set in a real place that isn't on any map, The Ms Tan Tales is a series about a teacher, a student, and a subject the system stopped counting.

What kind of book is this?

Coming up in the next episode... is a comic social realism novel about a school term, told in eight episodes, and it borrows from several places at once: the British school story, the workplace novel, and the state-of-the-nation fiction that notices what happened to towns that used to make things.

But the label I keep coming back to is *speculative pedagogy fiction*.

Speculative fiction asks what if the world were otherwise. Speculative pedagogy fiction asks the same question of a classroom. What if a teacher stopped producing keyrings and asked a Year 8 class to design for a stranger in a town that doesn't exist yet? What would that actually feel like; not in a case study or an impact report, but on a wet Wednesday, to a thirteen-year-old who didn't ask for it and to a second-year teacher who has to justify it to her head of department by Friday?

There's a pleasing recursion in it. The students in these pages are doing design fiction (imagining New Greencutting in 2050 and the people who'll live there). The book is doing the same thing one level up: imagining a version of the subject that the system currently has no column for.

There are plenty of novels set in schools. There don't appear to be any set in a D&T workshop. This one is, and unapologetically so.

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Dedication & Acknowledgements

This book is dedicated, with love and gratitude, to the people who made it (and me) possible.

To my wife, Mel, and to my grown-up sons, Drew and Owen, and their partners, Thena and Emma; for their patience, their humour, and for putting up with a house full of half-finished tasks and random ideas.

To my mother, Wendy, and to my late father, Henry, who gave me every opportunity to grow and to reach beyond a decidedly mediocre start in school and as an undergraduate. I got there in the end.

To my good friend Dr Alison Hardy at Nottingham Trent University, who challenges me, brings me back down to earth, and (in doing both) helps me become a better writer. To Tony Ryan and the team at The Design and Technology Association, tireless champions for a subject that deserves them.

To my fiction writer heroes, Jodi Taylor, Ben Aaronovitch, Caimh (C.K.) McDonnell, Jasper Fforde, and Terry Pratchett. Thanks for the inspiration and the entertainment.

To the unnamed few who, by throwing sizeable spanners into the works of my life, have unwittingly made me a more resilient and, I hope, a better person. There is no acknowledgement quite like the hard-won kind. I am genuinely grateful today.

And, finally, to the eternal Dao (which cannot be spoken, yet in whose silence every word is born) this book is offered. Like water, may it seek the low places, contend with nothing, and return at last to the nameless source from which all making flows.

Preface

Continuity Announcement

A quick word from OK Kitsune before the first episode.

You'll notice this book doesn't have chapters. It has episodes: eight of them, one a week, one lesson at a time, running across a single spring term the way a season of television runs across a schedule. That's partly a joke, and I hope a good one: The Ms Tan Tales borrows its whole shape from the kind of British school drama that used to fill a Tuesday-evening slot, complete with a title sequence, a "*coming up in the next episode*," and a cast you'd recognise across years of viewing even as the storylines moved on without you. But it isn't only a joke, and I'd like to spend a moment on the part that isn't.

An episode, in the sense I mean it, is a discrete period of learning that nonetheless links to the one before it and the one after it. It stands alone (you could, in principle, watch it in isolation and follow what's happening) but it also accumulates. Nothing that happens in Episode Five makes full sense without Episodes One through Four sitting underneath it, quietly doing their work. This is, if you think about it for more than a few seconds, also a reasonably accurate description of what a unit of work is supposed to be. A scheme of learning delivered one double lesson a week, over a term, is not eight unrelated hours. It's a serial. Skills, ideas, and half-remembered feelings are meant to carry across the gap between one Wednesday and the next, the way a viewer carries a subplot across an ad break, so that by the final episode something has actually built; not been taught eight times, but constructed

once, in eight instalments. I liked the idea of taking that structure at its word and building a novel out of the same joints.

That's the light version of why this book is organised the way it is. Here's the heavier one, which I've put in a preface rather than a lecture because a novel should be allowed to make its argument through Violet (the narrator) and Ms Tan (the star of the show) rather than through me, but which I think is worth saying plainly, once, before the story starts.

Design and Technology has spent the best part of the last two decades being quietly told it doesn't quite count.

It was a compulsory GCSE subject until 2004 and had been the single most popular optional subject in English secondary schools not long before that. In the years since, entries have fallen more or less continuously (a decline that predates any single policy and has more than one cause) but the fall sharpened considerably after 2010, when the then Education Secretary, Michael Gove, introduced the English Baccalaureate (aka 'the EBacc'), a school performance measure built from a fixed suite of 'core' academic subjects: English, maths, the sciences, a language, a humanity. D&T was not among them. Neither was art, music, or drama. Schools are marked, published, and league-tabled on how many pupils pass the EBacc combination, and schools (reasonably, if you follow the incentive all the way through) began timetabling, staffing, and option-blocking accordingly. By 2020, the proportion of pupils taking D&T at GCSE had roughly halved compared with a decade earlier; by some counts, looking at raw entry numbers rather than proportions, the fall by the early 2020s was closer to two-thirds. Ofsted's own chief inspector has publicly resisted pinning that decline entirely on the EBacc, pointing out that the slide began years before 2010. She isn't wrong that the story has

multiple causes. But a great many heads of department, subject associations, and (for what it's worth) a former Conservative Education Secretary who introduced GCSEs in the first place, have looked at the same figures and reached a blunter conclusion: that a subject built on making, prototyping, and material judgement was quietly deprioritised by a system that had stopped counting it.

The EBacc didn't arrive alone. It arrived alongside a broader and genuinely influential idea about what a curriculum should even be for: the so-called 'knowledge-rich' curriculum, drawing heavily on the American educationalist E.D. Hirsch's argument that a shared 'core knowledge,' explicitly taught and sequenced, is what allows children to read, reason, and participate fully in their own culture. Gove was open about the debt, quoting Hirsch directly and promising to strip the curriculum of what he called "*vapid happy talk*" in favour of a "*common stock of knowledge*." There is a real and serious argument buried in that idea, and I don't want this preface to pretend otherwise: knowing things matters, and a curriculum that gestures vaguely at 'skills' without ever specifying what a child should actually know can be its own kind of failure. But translated into policy at speed and applied unevenly across subjects that were never built the same way, 'knowledge-rich' quietly became a proxy for propositional knowledge (knowing that something is the case) at the expense of the procedural, embodied, practical knowing-how that subjects like D&T, art, music, drama, and PE are actually built from. A curriculum obsessed with what young people should know had correspondingly little to say about how learning happens, or about the value of a subject where the primary evidence of understanding is a thing you made, not a fact you can recite. Subjects that are active, creative, and practical don't fit that model comfortably, and

over the past decade and a half, they have paid for it in timetable hours.

Michael Gove is, by any honest account, a controversial figure in English education: genuinely, durably unpopular with a great many teachers, who have not forgiven the “*Blob*” remark or the sense, fair or not, of a profession being reformed at rather than with. I’ve tried not to write a hatchet job. He would say, and has said, that he was fighting for children who were being failed by low expectations dressed up as kindness, and that a great deal of what he built (the academies expansion, the exam reforms, the National Curriculum rewrite) was necessary and overdue. Reasonable people, including reasonable teachers, disagree about how much of that is true. What isn’t really in dispute is the scale of what changed, or that D&T departments like the one in this book have spent the years since absorbing the consequences, one shrinking timetable allocation at a time.

None of this is stated outright anywhere in the episodes that follow. Violet doesn’t know any of it and wouldn’t care if she did. But Ms Tan is teaching inside it, every Wednesday, whether she names it or not; in the materials budget Mr Harris has to defend, in the curriculum time that keeps getting quietly renegotiated, in the fact that what she’s attempting this term reads, to her own department, as faintly reckless rather than merely different. This book isn’t a policy argument wearing a school uniform. It’s a story about a teacher and a student and eight ordinary Wednesday mornings. But it’s set in a real place, even though Greencutting isn’t on any map, and I wanted you to know, before the first episode starts, exactly which real place that is.

If you are interested (and why should you be — it is a work of fiction, after all), the Further Reading (page 97) provides a bit more of the historical, political and pedagogical background.

This is a work of fiction. With the exception of public figures (including references to Michael Gove and E.D. Hirsch) who appear in a public capacity, all characters, names, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events or locales, is entirely coincidental. Please don't try to find out who they might be; they don't exist and are fabricated from 30 years of teaching, leading and researching D&T in England. Oops! I might have given some clues to who I really am!

— *OKRitsune*

P.S. There is a 'glossary for the uninitiated' at the end of the book, if you are unfamiliar with the education system in England, and want to know more.



Dramatis Personae

The full cast of Season One: no plot, no spoilers, just the people, roughly in the order the ‘cameras’ find them.

In the workshop

VIOLET JONES: Year 8. Small, watchful, funny in a dry way she rations carefully. Sits third bench back, nearest the window, and would prefer you didn’t make anything of it. Thinks with her hands. Currently not impressed.

MS TAN: teacher of design and technology (D&T, definitely *not* DT!); second year in the job, though not her second year of knowing how things are made. Grew up above an ironmonger’s shop a very long way from Greencutting. Believes in showing rather than telling. Says *right* in a way that stops a room.

BAZ: D&T technician. Formerly of Hollis & Marsh Edge Tools; latterly of a store cupboard organised on principles known only to himself. Writes exclusively in capitals. Knows everything that happens in this room.

PRIYA CHAUHAN: Violet’s best friend since Year 7. Misses nothing while appearing to miss everything. Currently designing for a dead man, and thriving.

KYLE PARDOE: classmate. In a long-running feud with the pillar drill, which he started. Once left a glue gun switched on over an entire Christmas holiday.

RYAN OKAFOR: classmate. Designing on behalf of a man who walks six dogs at once. Ambitions escalating weekly.

ADITI VARMA: classmate. Extremely good at nearly everything, in the specific way that comes from actually caring whether things are correct. Patience for the approximate: limited.

THE COVER TECHNICIAN: in for one Wednesday only. Doing her best with somebody else's paperwork.

In the building

MR HARRIS: Head of D&T; thirty years at the bench. Known to every child in the school, with a certain worn affection, as Mr Hairy-Arse (a nickname so old that nobody now living remembers coining it). Believes in a crisp joint, a swept floor, and a keyring every kid takes home. Very busy this term.

MR RUTHERFORD: Vice Principal (Standards), Bright Lights Trust. Believes, sincerely, in the dashboard. Appears rarely. Counts everything.

At home

MUM (DONNA JONES): Violet's mum. Care worker on rotating shifts; keeper of the sewing basket under the stairs and the button tin inside it. Loves fiercely. Sleeps when she can.

CALLUM JONES: Violet's brother, sixteen. Loud, everywhere, and employed at the retail park that stands where the works used to. Not unkind. Just loud.

In New Greencutting, 2050

(fictional, even by this book's standards)

DEB HARGREAVES: fifty-eight. Sorter at the Reclamation Depot, on the old Hollis & Marsh site. Six shifts in eight. Deserves better pockets.

ALED: one hundred and four. Deceased, or at the very least dead-adjacent. In Priya's care, which is its own situation.

THE DOG WALKER: walks six dogs at once, professionally. Braver than any of us.

THE ALLOTMENT-OWNER: grows things in the future. Property of Ms Tan: the only persona in the room being designed for by an actual professional.

In legend only

DENZEL: a Year 11, some years before our story begins. Attempted to cut a piece of acrylic with something that was not designed to cut acrylic. The bench remembers.

And GREENCUTTING itself: a borough in the Midlands that used to make things and now mostly sells them. Not on any map. Entirely real.



Ms Tan, ECT of D&T

Prologue

New Greencutting. 2050.

The works had been shut for longer than most people in Greencutting had been alive, and it was still the busiest place in town.

They called it the Reclamation Depot now, though the old name was cast into the gatepost in letters a hand deep (HOLLIS & MARSH) and nobody had ever quite got round to grinding it off. The sign had outlived the firm; the firm had outlived the making; the making had outlived the men who did it by a margin nobody liked to measure. What came through the gates now was not iron ore or ash-handle billets but everything the rest of the country had finished with: kettles, chairs, coats, the small dead machinery of other people's lives, tipped from lorries and sorted by hand into the things that could be used again and the things that could only be broken down for whatever parts of them still could.

The woman on the early shift had a name, but the town, on the whole, had stopped using names for the people at the depot. She sorted. Six days in eight, five in the morning until one, she stood at the belt and decided the fate of objects made by strangers; and she was good at it, in the way you can only be good at a thing nobody thinks is skilled. She could tell at a glance what had been built to last and then let down, and what had never stood a chance.

Which is how the shears came to her.

They were black-handled and heavy; the heavy that only comes from metal made back when metal was assumed to have a future. Garden shears, older than the depot, older than the closing, older, she'd have bet, than the gatepost. One handle had gone: snapped

clean, the way good steel doesn't, which meant it wasn't the steel that had failed. Everything above the break was perfect. Everything above the break wanted only to go on doing its one job, which was to cut, cleanly, for another hundred years.

The correct thing (the sorted thing) was to send it down the line and break it for the good steel in it.

She did not do the correct thing.

She took it home. She had, in a drawer, the grey moulded grip off a garden light that had stopped lighting, and a solar cell the size of a thumbnail that still, stubbornly, worked. Over three evenings, at a kitchen table, with the wrong tools and nobody's permission, she grafted the new onto the old (the future onto the past, though she'd have laughed at anyone who said it like that) until the shears closed sweet and true in her hand, and would open again, now, on their own, in the light.

Then she used them. That was all. She cut back the thing that needed cutting back, stood them by the door for next time, and thought no more about it than you think about any tool that has quietly agreed to go on working.

She never knew (could not have known) that somewhere, some when, in a cold classroom that smelled of last term, those same shears would be held up in front of a room of thirteen-year-olds, and a teacher would say: someone made this; and someone else, later, refused to let it die.

She only knew that the town had made things once, and did not, much, anymore.

She thought somebody ought to start again.

She was not wrong.

Episode 1: The Persona Card

(or: Nothing to Make)

New term, new project, and there isn't a keyring in sight. Violet is not impressed.

The workshop smelled of last term. That's the specific and terrible thing about the first Wednesday back in January; the radiators hadn't caught up with the room yet, the extraction fans hadn't been switched back on, and everything under the dust sheets was still marinating in whatever it had been marinating in since the end of November: MDF shavings, three-in-one oil, and one memorable glue gun that Kyle Pardoe had left running over the entire Christmas holiday, which nobody had noticed until the smoke alarm did.

I got to my bench first, which is not an accident, whatever Priya says. Third one back, nearest the window, close enough to the extraction unit that I can hear it thinking. If somebody else had been sitting there when I walked in, I would have had to kill them, or find another bench, and killing them is less effort. I dropped my bag, sat down, and did the thing I always do in a new term, which is check that the room is still the room. Same order of clamps on the wall. Same six-inch scar in the bench top where a Year 11 called Denzel had, three years before I existed at this school, apparently tried to cut a piece of acrylic with something that was not designed to cut acrylic, and had been discussed in hushed, awed tones by technicians ever since. Baz's calendar on the store cupboard door, still on December, a Ferrari nobody had asked for.

It checked out. Good. I could begin the term.

Ms Tan took the register properly. Not the bored scroll down a list of surnames some teachers do, not the little theatrical pause before a name they suspect might be funny. She looked up. She said each one right, first go, no drama, like she'd actually met the human attached to it, which, to be fair, she had.

"Violet," she said, when she got to me, and moved straight on, because there was nothing there worth stopping for.

I noticed. I notice that kind of thing more than most people would give me credit for. I just didn't know yet how much cause I'd have to.

"Right," said Ms Tan, once the register was down and the last of the coats had stopped rustling. She has a way of saying 'right' that makes everyone actually stop, which is a skill I would pay real money to have. Not loud. Not a teacher-voice. Just a woman who has decided the talking part of the morning is over now, thank you. *"New term. New project. And before anyone asks; no. We are NOT making keyrings."*

There was a specific, wounded silence, the kind you only get from thirty Year 8s who have just had a future taken from them.

"But Mr Harris said..." started Ryan Okafor, from the bench by the fire extinguisher, in the tone of a man citing case law.

"Mr Harris did the keyrings with you last term," said Ms Tan. *"This term you're with me. Different term, different brief."*

*"So what **are** we making?"* This from Kyle Pardoe, glue-gun Kyle, who has never in his life asked a question he didn't already suspect the answer to would annoy him.

“That,” said Ms Tan, “is the interesting part. Nothing. Not yet. Possibly not at all.”

I felt my whole stomach do a thing it does not often do in D&T, which is drop. **Possibly not at all** is not a sentence I have any use for. I like a brief. I like a brief with steps in it, ideally numbered, ideally laminated, ideally exactly as difficult as it looks and no more difficult than that. ‘Possibly not at all’ is the kind of sentence that gets handed to you right before someone asks you to be creative on command in front of twenty-nine witnesses.

Ms Tan reached under the front bench and brought out a pair of garden shears.

Not new ones. Proper old ones, black-handled, the kind of heavy that only comes from metal that was made back when people assumed metal ought to last a while. Except somebody had done something to the handle; grafted a smooth grey grip onto it, moulded and modern, with what looked horribly like a tiny solar cell set into the base, the sort of thing you’d find on a garden light from Wilko. Old tool. New graft. Like somebody from the future had found something broken and useful lying around and simply fixed it with whatever they had to hand, without asking anyone’s permission or checking whether it went.

“This,” said Ms Tan, holding it up so the whole room could see, “was made at Hollis & Marsh. Probably before any of your grandparents were born. And this,” she tapped the grey grip, “was added a lot more recently, by someone I’ve never met, who I know nothing about, except that they needed these shears to still be doing their job, and they didn’t have the money or the patience to buy a new pair.”

Nobody said anything. Even Kyle looked briefly less like Kyle.

*“I want you to imagine that person,” she said. “Not now. Write it down now and it’ll be rubbish, trust me. I want you to imagine the **town** that person is standing in. What’s changed. What hasn’t. What’s still called Greencutting and what people have quietly stopped calling it. That’s the project. New Greencutting. Twenty-fifty. Twenty-five years from this exact Wednesday.”*

She started handing out cards, face down, one to a bench.

“You each get a person,” she said. “A real one, or as real as I could make up on a Sunday night. Their life, their job, one actual problem they have; nothing enormous, nothing end-of-the-world, just an ordinary rubbish thing about their ordinary day that doesn’t work right. Your job for the next eight weeks isn’t to make something. It’s to work out what they need. The making, if there’s any making, comes later, and it comes because you’ve earned it, not because it’s Wednesday.”

Eight weeks! I did not have eight weeks of patience for a brief with no steps in it. I had, generously, about eight minutes.

I turned my card over...

CITIZEN FILE • NEW GREENCUTTING • 2050

NAME: Deb Hargreaves

AGE: 58

OCCUPATION: Sorter, Reclamation Depot (the old Hollis & Marsh works)

SHIFT: 05:00–13:00, six days in eight

THE PROBLEM: New uniform every rotation. Never any decent pockets. Keeps losing the one photograph she has of her mother.

YOUR JOB: Design something that helps.

I read it twice. I did not feel the rush of inspiration I understand other people are supposed to feel at this point, the one you see on

the TV programmes where somebody gasps and grabs a pencil. What I felt was the very specific dread of being handed a stranger and told to invent, from nothing, in a room with extraction fans, what that stranger's whole life was actually like.

Fifty-eight. A depot that used to be a place that made things and is now a place that sorts things other people have finished with. Six shifts out of eight. One photograph.

I didn't know what to **do** with any of that. There was no first move. No worksheet telling me: step one, measure the card, step two, draw a net. Just a woman called Deb who I had invented approximately four seconds ago and already, somehow, owed something to.

Priya, next bench over, was already three ideas deep and enjoying every second of it.

"Mine's called Aled," she announced, to nobody, to everybody, to the general vicinity. "He's a hundred and four and he keeps forgetting he's already dead. I'm designing him a reminder system."

*"He's not **allowed** to be dead," I said. "It says a problem. Not a... logistical situation."*

*"He's dead-**adjacent**," said Priya, entirely undeterred, already sketching something that involved, as far as I could tell, a small drone. "It's a grey area. Ms Tan will love it. Ms Tan loves a grey area."*

I did not, currently, love anything. I looked at Deb Hargreaves's file again, at 'never any decent pockets,' at 'keeps losing the one photograph she has of her mother,' and felt the whole shapeless size of the task settle over the bench like a dust sheet. Design something. Something. The word did nothing. It had no edges. I could not hold it.

So (and I want to be honest, because I don't think this counts as trying, not really, not by the actual rules) I stopped trying to hold the whole thing and picked up the one bit of it that had an edge.

Never any decent pockets!?

That, at least, was a real problem, with a real shape. Pockets rip. Pockets gape. Pockets let things fall out of them at exactly the moment you need the thing not to fall out. I know this because my school blazer has had a hole in the left pocket since October and I have lost, into the lining, four hair bobbles, a fiver, and a note from Callum I never got to read the end of. I didn't design anything. I just sat there turning a biro over in my fingers and thinking, with what felt like unreasonable intensity, about pockets (what makes one good, what makes one useless, whether a pocket could ever actually be 'trusted') while, technically, twenty-nine other Year 8s got on with the actual assignment.

Ms Tan came round the benches while we worked. Not marking, not hovering, just moving, the way Baz moves round the store cupboard; like she already knew exactly where everything was and was only confirming it. She stopped at mine.

"Deb," she said, reading upside down, easily, the way people do when they're actually used to workshops and not just teaching in one. *"What have you got?"*

"Nothing," I said. Automatically. It's my answer to that question in every subject, and it is very rarely true, and it wasn't true now either. *"I got stuck on the pockets thing."*

I expected the thing teachers do, which is a small, disappointed noise and a redirect back onto the actual task. Ms Tan didn't do that.

“Show me,” she said, and pulled a stool round, and sat down like she had all the time in the world, which she did not, because there were twenty-nine other benches and about four minutes left before the bell.

So I showed her... not a drawing, because there wasn't one, just the biro turning over and over, and a sentence I hadn't planned to say out loud, about how a pocket has to hold something without you thinking about it, has to just quietly 'do its job,' the whole time, without you checking on it every five seconds to make sure it's still there.

“That’s not nothing,” said Ms Tan. “That’s the actual brief. You’ve just found it from underneath, instead of from on top.” She stood up before I could work out whether that was a compliment. “Write it down properly before you lose it. Not the pockets. The bit after, ‘quietly does its job.’ That’s design language. Most of this room would take three weeks to say that sentence and you just said it by accident.”

Then she was gone, onto Ryan's bench, where somebody appeared to be attempting to design a product exclusively out of the word *dunno*.

I did not write it down. I meant to. But the bell went about ninety seconds later, and there is a specific chaos to the end of a D&T lesson; stools scraping, someone's forgotten to switch off the extraction fan and gets bellowed at by Baz from somewhere unseen, Kyle's bag exploding its entire contents across the floor for reasons that were never established; that does not leave much room for writing things down.

We packed up. I filed Deb Hargreaves's card into my folder, or meant to, and somehow it ended up not in the folder at all but still in my hand, and by the time I noticed that, I was already halfway

down the corridor towards lunch, past the noticeboard with the Year 9 options evening poster nobody my age had any reason to look at yet, one photograph of somebody's dead mother's face on a card in my fist, and Priya beside me narrating an increasingly unhinged theory about Aled's drone.

I meant to bin the card. I want that on record. I had every intention of binning the card.

I did not bin the card.



Episode 2: The Register

(or: It's Violet)

A cover technician reads out the wrong name. Ms Tan doesn't even look up.

I did not bin the card. Why?

I want to be clear that I made several sincere attempts. It sat in the zip pocket of my bag all through Thursday, all through the weekend, all through a Sunday afternoon where Callum had the football on so loud I could feel it in the sofa, and every time I saw it I thought, right, that's going in the bin, that is a piece of admin I don't need, and then I didn't do it, and by Wednesday morning I had stopped pretending to myself that I was going to.

Deb Hargreaves, fifty-eight, terrible pockets, one photograph of her mother. I had thought about the photograph more than I meant to. Not the design of it. Just the fact of it, a woman my mum's age (minus a bit), standing at a sorting belt at five in the morning with somebody's whole face folded up small enough to lose.

Baz wasn't in. There was a note on the store cupboard in his handwriting, which is enormous and only ever in capitals, saying DENTIST BACK P.M., and a woman I didn't recognise setting up the trolley instead, going through drawers like she'd never met them before, which she probably hadn't. Cover technician. Nobody's idea of an event. I clocked it the way you clock weather (mildly, in passing, filed under 'today is slightly different') and thought no more about it, which, looking back, was a mistake, although not

one I could have avoided, because you can't pre-flinch from a thing you don't know is coming.

"Right," said Ms Tan, and the room did the thing it does now, where it just stops. *"Last week you had a person. This week I want a Tuesday."*

Nobody understood that sentence. I could see it not landing across thirty faces at once, which was at least comforting, in the sense that I wasn't the only one behind.

"Not a whole life," she said. *"You don't need a whole life yet. You need one ordinary day, and the one part of that day that goes wrong for them, every single time, in a small, boring, completely unglamorous way."* She wrote it on the whiteboard, block capitals, no flourish: 'ON AN ORDINARY TUESDAY, THE WORST BIT OF [NAME]'S DAY IS —' *"Finish that sentence. One sentence. If it takes you longer than a sentence, you've made it too big."*

I wrote: 'Deb's pockets let her down exactly when she needs them not to.'

It felt small and stupid and completely correct, all at once, which is not a combination I get very often.

Then Ms Tan did the thing she does that I still don't fully have words for, where she doesn't tell you how to do something, she just does it in front of you, badly, on purpose, so you can watch what badly actually looks like. She grabbed a scrap of card off the side, and a biro, and said, *"Watch; I'm doing this at the speed I actually think, not the speed that looks good,"* and then just went for it. A dog walker who kept losing leads. Scribble, cross out, sworn at under her breath, binned. A dog walker who kept losing 'dogs,' which made Ryan actually laugh out loud. Binned. A little clip, hand-

drawn, ugly, four seconds of thinking translated straight onto card with no dignity involved whatsoever.

“That,” she said, holding up the ugly little clip like it had personally wronged her, “is a terrible idea. I’m not attached to it. It took me eleven seconds and it’s already in the bin in my head. That’s the whole trick. You are not precious about the first six. You are only precious about the one that survives.”

I tried it. Six terrible ideas for Deb’s pockets, fast, ugly, no dignity. A pouch that clipped to a belt. A pouch that clipped to a belt but ‘inside’ the waistband, so nobody could see it from outside a uniform. Something with a magnet. Something with a magnet that would definitely set off the depot’s metal detectors and get Deb sacked, which I crossed out so hard I went through the card.

I didn’t love it. I’ll be honest about that, because I think honesty is the only interesting way to tell you any of this. I didn’t hate it either. It was the first time in this entire baffling project that I’d done something and not immediately wanted to set fire to the brief, which is not the same as enjoying myself, but it is, I recognise now, at least in the same postcode.

That’s when the cover technician did the knives.

It’s a safety thing; every craft knife has to be signed out, signed back in, no exceptions, Baz would tell you the same in a voice that suggests someone once lost a finger over it. She had the old, printed list, the one from before Christmas, the one nobody had thought to update because why would you, and she went down it in order, surname first, the way the system spits it out, the way it’s always spat it out, in the field that’s supposed to be greyed over and sometimes isn’t, depending which member of reception did the last data pull and how much of a rush they were in.

She called a name.

Not mine. A name that used to be mine, in the sense that a coat you grew out of used to be yours; you wore it, it kept you warm at the time, it is not a lie that it once fit, and it is also not a thing you would put back on.

Half a second, maybe less. Nobody in the room said anything, because nobody in the room needed telling; everyone at this table had heard my actual name for a year and a half and had, at this point, entirely stopped finding it interesting, which is exactly the correct amount for thirteen-year-olds to find another thirteen-year-old's name.

Ms Tan didn't look up.

"It's Violet," she said, in exactly the voice she uses for 'pass the trimmer' or 'mind the extraction hose,' mid-sentence, mid-thought, not even breaking whatever she'd been doing with her hands, and carried straight on to the next name on the list.

The cover technician went a bit pink, said sorry, my fault, bad list, and moved on too, and that, actually, was the entire event. Four seconds. Maybe five.

I want to tell you it didn't land anywhere, but that would be a lie, and I said I'd be honest. It landed exactly where it always lands, which is somewhere just under the ribs, a small cold drop, the particular flavour of 'oh, that, again,' except it hit the floor faster than it used to. It used to sit there a while. Sixth of March last year, a supply teacher, a whole excruciating minute of it, I could still tell you the colour of the walls in that room. This time it was down and gone almost before I'd registered picking it up, and I think (I worked this out properly for the first time only afterwards, walking to lunch) that the speed of the drop had nothing to do with me, or with

practice, or with getting used to it, which you don't, not really. It had to do with the four seconds. Nobody in that room had to sit with it, because Ms Tan hadn't let it become a thing to sit with. It's Violet. Next name. That's not nothing. I would like whoever designed the register system to understand that it is not nothing, and also that they are appalling at their job.

Two summers ago, if you're doing the maths, which I'm not going to do for you in any more detail than that, because it isn't the interesting part. The interesting part was never the two summers. The interesting part is a woman I'd known for four Wednesdays not even breaking stride.

She came round about ten minutes later, once the knives were all out and Kyle had already nearly taken a chunk out of his own thumb doing something nobody had asked him to do, and stopped at my bench, and looked at the six ugly ideas, and did not mention the register at all. Not a flicker. Not a 'you okay?' that would have meant stopping the whole lesson to have a conversation I did not want to have in front of Ryan Okafor.

"Which one survives?" she said, tapping the belt-clip that lived inside the waistband, the one I'd nearly bothered to be a bit proud of.

"That one. Probably."

"Why."

"Because nobody can see it," I said, *"so nobody can take it off her. And she doesn't have to think about it. It's just... there. Doing its job."*

"There's that phrase again," said Ms Tan, and moved on to Priya, who was somewhere deep into designing what appeared to be a small robotic urn, and I heard her say, from the next bench,

completely deadpan, “*Priya, I need you to tell me whether Aled ‘knows,’*” and Priya say, with total confidence, “*he suspects,*” and that, more than anything else that had happened in the last hour, is what actually made me laugh, properly, out loud, the first real laugh I think I’d had in that room all year.

Priya caught my eye on her way past the bin with a shaving of card in her hand, glanced at the empty spot on the technician’s clipboard where the crossed-out name still sat, half-visible, not yet re-printed, and rolled her eyes so hard I thought she might do herself an injury.

“*New tech,*” she said, in the tone of someone reviewing a restaurant. “*One star. Terrible admin. Lovely energy though.*”

“*She seemed nice,*” I said, which was true.

“*She can be nice **and** useless,*” said Priya. “*Women contain multitudes.*” She’d read that somewhere and had been using it on everything for a fortnight, mugs, homework, Callum. It didn’t fit here any better than it fit anywhere else, and it was exactly the right thing to say, because it meant nothing had to be about anything. We were back to normal. We had never really left normal. That was rather the point.

By the end of the lesson, I had a scrap of card in front of me that didn’t look like much (a rough rectangle, a fold, a slit cut slightly wonky because I’d been rushing the last five minutes) and underneath it, in biro, in handwriting that gets worse the faster I think: ‘quietly does its job.’

I packed the card away properly this time. Folder, front pocket, zipped. Not lost in a lining somewhere, not left on a bench for the cleaner. I walked to lunch feeling (and this is the most accurate word I’ve got, even though it undersells it slightly) ‘steadier’ than I

had at the start of the lesson, for reasons that, if you'd stopped me in the corridor and asked me to explain, I would not have been able to give you in a single ordinary Tuesday sentence.

I'd have needed at least two.



Episode 3: First Cut

(or: Rough Cut)

Violet tries the technique she said she wouldn't. It works. She will deny this.

Baz was back, which you could tell before you even got through the door, because the whole corridor smelled correctly again; proper machine oil, not whatever ghost-smell the room had been running on with him off having a molar looked at. He was at the store cupboard doing what he always does, which is standing very still holding a single screw up to the light like it had personally disappointed him.

"Pardoe," he said, without turning round, as I came in behind Kyle, "that is not three-in-one oil. That is WD-40. If you put WD-40 anywhere near that pillar drill again I will know, because I know everything that happens in this room, and I will have your guts."

"I didn't touch the pillar drill," said Kyle, in the tone of a man who had absolutely touched the pillar drill.

I didn't say anything, because it wasn't my business, but I clocked (automatically, without deciding to) that the tin Kyle had actually been holding was the beeswax polish, not the WD-40 at all, and that Baz was, for once, wrong, and I nearly told him so, and then didn't, because some corrections aren't worth the argument. Three weeks ago, I wouldn't have known there was a difference between the two tins. Three weeks ago, I wouldn't have known which shelf either of them lived on. It's a strange thing, noticing you've picked something up without meaning to. Like discovering you've learned

the words to a song purely from it being on in the background of somewhere else.

“Right,” said Ms Tan, once we were all in, and coats off, and the extraction fans had done their slow, unwilling wake-up hum. *“New rule today. Last two weeks, I wanted lots of ideas. Today I want one.”*

Some of the room actually sat up at that. A rule. An actual, gettable rule, with an edge on it, after a fortnight of possibly not at all. I felt the room’s relief and did not entirely share it, because a rule like that comes with its own cost, which is that once you’ve picked the one thing, the one thing is now your responsibility, and there’s nobody else’s idea left to hide behind if it turns out to be rubbish.

“You’ve all got a spread of sketches from the last fortnight,” Ms Tan went on. *“Some good, some... Ryan, I’ve seen your dog walker, we’ll talk. Today you choose one. Not the safest one. The one that actually survives you asking it hard questions.”*

I looked at my six ugly ideas from the week before. The magnet one, crossed out so hard I’d gone through the card. The belt-clip. The belt-clip inside the waistband, the one I’d written quietly does its job underneath in handwriting that had clearly been in a hurry to get somewhere else.

I knew which one it was going to be before Ms Tan had even finished the sentence, and I resented that a bit, if I’m honest, the way you resent already knowing the answer to a quiz question before anyone’s read it out; it takes some of the fun away, being right that fast, and it makes the not-knowing of the last fortnight look, in hindsight, a bit performed. Which it hadn’t been. I want that on record too. The not-knowing had been completely real. It had just, apparently, been leading somewhere the whole time, the way

a corridor's leading somewhere even when you can't see round the bend.

Ms Tan built a mock-up at the front to show us how it was done, which by now I'd started thinking of as her doing the thing, the thing being: making a bad version of something on purpose, in public, at speed, and not flinching about it. Card, off-cuts, a strip of tape she tore with her teeth because the dispenser was jammed and Baz was still mid-lecture to Kyle about the pillar drill. She was building (she told us, narrating the whole time in the voice of someone thinking out loud rather than someone performing competence) a torch that a fictional allotment-owner could clip to a trowel. It went wrong almost immediately. The clip wouldn't hold. She looked at it for a second, said, "*Nope*," with what I can only describe as real cheerfulness, and put it straight in the bin without a single further thought about it, the way you'd flick away a fly.

"That's the whole of it," she said, wiping her hands on her jeans. *"That took forty seconds and it was rubbish and now it's gone and I've lost nothing. The version that survives you is never the first version. If you're precious about the first version, you'll never get to the one that's actually any good."*

I have thought about that sentence more than I've thought about most things anyone's said to me in a classroom, before or since, and I didn't think about it very hard at all in the moment, which tells you something about how these things actually work. You don't feel the important bits landing. You just, later, find you're still carrying them.

Baz had the felt in a drawer that only he understood the logic of... not off-cuts exactly, more a sort of retirement home for material too good to bin and too odd-shaped to be any real use, which is, I think, roughly how Baz sees most of the human race as well. I

asked for a scrap big enough for a pouch. He looked at me for slightly longer than the request strictly required.

“What colour,” he said, which was not a question I’d been expecting to have an opinion about, and discovered, on the spot, that I did.

“Navy. Or that dark green, if you’ve got it.”

He had the dark green. Of course he had the dark green. Baz has everything, in a drawer, in a shade nobody else would have thought to keep.

I want to slow down here, because this is the bit I actually remember properly, in a way I don’t remember most of school, which mostly exists in my memory as a sort of grey hum with occasional embarrassing bits sticking out of it. I had the felt flat on the bench. I had the rough shape I’d drawn out in pencil from the card version (pouch, fold line, a slit for the clip to sit through) and I picked up the scissors, and I cut.

Not the fast, ugly cutting from the ideation lesson, six shapes in five rushed minutes, thinking with a knife instead of a pen. This was slower. This mattered in a way the other cutting hadn’t, because this piece was going to actually be the thing, or as close to the thing as felt and tape were going to get me, and I found (and this is the bit I don’t have a tidy explanation for, I’m just reporting it) that the slower it got, the calmer I got, which is the exact opposite of how most things in my life work. Usually slowing down means more time for the panic to catch up with me. This was the other way round. The scissors went where I told them to go. The line held. Somewhere in there I stopped being aware of the room at all; not in the way where you’re pretending not to be aware of it, which I do constantly, but properly, actually gone, the extraction fans and Kyle’s ongoing feud with the pillar drill and everything else fading

down to almost nothing, the way it does, apparently, for other people, when they're doing a thing they're good at. I wasn't performing boredom. I'd forgotten boredom was an option.

Priya surfaced this fact for me, because Priya surfaces most facts for me, by leaning across the gap between our benches with something in her hands that could generously be described as a robotic urn and was less generously a sort of felt-and-wire nest that looked like it might be sentient.

"Aled's decided he doesn't want the reminder system after all," she reported. *"Aled wants a shrine. I have made Aled a shrine. Do not ask me how this happened, I genuinely do not know."*

I held up the pouch. It wasn't finished (the fold wasn't quite square, the slit was a fraction too wide) but it had a shape now. An actual, holdable shape.

"That," said Priya, examining it with the particular seriousness she reserves for things she's about to undercut, *"looks like something a person would actually want. Which is annoying. Mine looks like it's about to achieve consciousness and ask for a lawyer."*

"Yours is ambitious," I said.

"Mine is a warning," said Priya, and went back to her shrine, entirely satisfied with that assessment.

Ms Tan came round about twenty minutes later, when most of the room had something roughly 3D on their bench and Kyle had, against every expectation, produced something that was almost certainly a lamp. She picked up the pouch, turned it over once, didn't say anything nice about it, which by now I'd stopped expecting her to, because that isn't the currency she deals in.

“Where does she keep it at five in the morning,” she said, “before her shift, when her hands are full?”

I hadn't got that far. I opened my mouth expecting nothing much to come out of it, the way you do when a teacher asks you a real question and you're mostly just hoping to survive the next four seconds, and instead heard myself say, with a confidence I hadn't authorised in advance:

“It has to already be on her. Not in a bag; she won't check a bag, not at five in the morning, not with a flask in one hand and toast in the other. It's got to be already fastened on before she's properly awake, so finding it isn't a thing she has to remember to do. It just has to already be there.”

Ms Tan looked at me for a second in a way I couldn't entirely read.

“Write that down,” she said. “Word for word, if you can manage it. That's the best sentence anyone in this room's said about their brief all fortnight, and you said it without thinking, which is usually when people say the true thing.”

Then she moved off towards Ryan, whose dog walker had apparently evolved, unasked, into something involving a small drone as well, and I sat there with the pouch in one hand and a small, private, entirely unwelcome feeling of having done something right.

I talked myself down from it almost immediately, obviously. One good sentence isn't a personality change. One decent pouch made out of a technician's retirement-home felt doesn't undo a year and a half of being, broadly, unimpressed by everything this school has ever asked of me. I told myself all of that, quite firmly, on the way to the bin with my off-cuts, and it was all true, and none of it actually landed the way it was supposed to, the way a good telling-off

doesn't land when some other, quieter part of you already knows it's wrong.

At the end of the lesson, I didn't leave the pouch on the bench for Baz to sweep into the scrap drawer, which is what happens to nearly everything by Wednesday lunchtime, mine included, most weeks. I found the flat pocket at the bottom of my bag (the one that usually has a dead pen and someone else's homework sheet in it) and I put the pouch in there instead, carefully, fold-side down so it wouldn't crush, and did not examine, even slightly, why that seemed to matter.



Episode 4: Quality Control

(or: Unannounced)

Mr Harris drops by unannounced. He was not expecting this.

I had the pouch out of my bag before Ms Tan had even finished taking the register, which I want on record as a small historic event, because in every other subject I own, getting equipment out early is not a thing that happens to me. It just seemed stupid to wait. It was in the front pocket where I'd left it, fold-side down, exactly as careful as I'd left it, and I had it on the bench and was turning it over in the light before I'd properly taken my coat off, and nobody made anything of it, which was its own kind of relief. Nobody needed to. That's rather the point of a habit; it isn't supposed to be an event.

"Last week," said Ms Tan, once the room had settled, "you built something. This week I want you to try and break it."

There was the usual half-beat of nobody understanding the sentence, and then Ryan Okafor said, with real feeling, *"I'm not smashing my dog walker, I've put three lessons into that dog walker,"* and Ms Tan said, *"Good. Bring it up here. We'll break it together, properly, where everyone can watch."*

Ryan brought his dog walker up, which by this point had, through processes I hadn't fully tracked, acquired a small drone attachment and what appeared to be a retractable lead mechanism inspired at least partly by a Bond film. Ms Tan held it like she was assessing a horse.

"Right," she said. "Tell me about the person who owns this."

"Bloke who walks dogs for a living. Six at once, sometimes."

"Six leads."

"Six leads."

"It's raining," said Ms Tan. "It's been raining for a week. One of the six dogs has just seen a squirrel and is currently airborne. Does this drone still work?"

Ryan opened his mouth and shut it again.

"Battery," said Ms Tan. "How long does it last?"

"...I hadn't thought about the battery."

"Nobody ever thinks about the battery," she said, not unkindly, "until the battery's the whole problem. That's what testing is. It's not being mean about your own idea. It's asking it the questions before real life asks them for you, because real life doesn't ask nicely and it doesn't ask once." She handed the dog walker back to Ryan, who was already muttering about waterproofing, and looked round the rest of us. "Whatever's on your bench; I want you asking it the same questions today. Not 'is this a nice idea.' 'Does this survive contact with a real Tuesday.'"

I looked at the pouch. It had survived approximately no Tuesdays whatsoever, real or otherwise, so I supposed that was where we were starting.

The flap gaped.

That was the whole problem, once I'd actually made myself look at it properly instead of just being pleased it existed. I'd cut the closing flap square, the way you'd assume a flap should be cut, and when I folded it down over the opening it sat there looking finished and was, in fact, not finished, because there was a good centimetre of gap at the top corner where anything small enough (a

photograph, say, folded down to the size Ms Tan had described in the brief) could simply post itself out into the world and be gone.

I tried a popper. Baz didn't have poppers small enough that wouldn't look like something off a duvet cover. I tried a loop of the felt itself, cut into a thin strip, and it worked exactly once and then stretched out of shape and stopped working, which is worse than it never working, because now Deb thinks it's safe.

I sat with it for a while, turning it over, doing the thing where you stop trying to fix the actual problem and just look at the shape instead, the way you'd look at a word you've spelled so many times it's stopped looking like a word. And somewhere in the looking I noticed that the gape was only there because I'd cut the flap square. If the flap were cut on the diagonal instead (not a fastening at all, just a fold that wanted, by the geometry of its own shape, to sit closed rather than open) the fabric's own tension would do the holding. No popper. No loop. No separate piece of anything to lose, or forget, or fumble at five in the morning with a flask in one hand.

I recut it. It held.

I did not make a noise about this. I want that clearly understood, because it would have been completely reasonable to make a noise about it, and Kyle two benches down had made a noise about considerably less when his lamp had, against all expectation, actually lit up. I just sat there for a second with a closed pouch that stayed closed because of how it was shaped rather than because of anything bolted onto it, and felt something in my chest do a small, private, entirely unauthorised thing that I am choosing to describe, for the purposes of this account, as 'satisfaction,' and nothing more embarrassing than that.

Priya, next bench over, was having a considerably worse Tuesday. Aled's shrine had, over the course of the lesson, developed a lighting requirement.

"It needs to glow," she informed me, with the flat certainty of someone who has stopped being able to see the size of the thing they're building. *"Aled's dead. Dead things need atmosphere. I've asked Baz if there's a battery small enough and he looked at me the way my nan looks at Deliveroo."*

"Does it need to glow, though. As a design decision."

"Everything needs to glow, Violet. That's just design." She held the shrine up to the light, where it cast the specific, faintly alarming shadow of something with too many opinions about its own purpose. *"Yours has got smug all over it, by the way. What happened?"*

"Nothing happened."

"Your face happened. Your face is doing a thing."

I put my face away and got back to work, which is, I have found, the single most effective response to Priya noticing something true.

Ms Tan came round not long after and picked up the pouch without asking, which by now I'd stopped minding, because that's just what she does with things on benches... she doesn't ask permission to look at your thinking, she just looks, the way you wouldn't ask permission to read a shop sign.

"You changed the flap," she said. Not a question.

"It was gaping. I worked out it was because I'd cut it square. Cut it on an angle instead and the shape does the work; it doesn't need anything to hold it shut, it just wants to sit that way." I heard myself keep going before she'd asked me to. *"So there's nothing for her to*

fasten or check or lose. It's just... already closed. Unless she deliberately opens it."

"That's a proper design decision," said Ms Tan. "Not a fix. A decision. There's a difference, and you just made one without me telling you the difference existed." She put the pouch down exactly where she'd found it, which I noticed, and appreciated more than the sentence itself. *"What made you think of the angle?"*

"I don't know. I just looked at it for a bit."

"That's most of the job, that is. Looking at it for a bit. Everyone wants the clever bit to be a lightning bolt. It's mostly just looking at something for slightly longer than feels reasonable."

I was going to say something back (I had something, actually, forming, about how looking at things for slightly longer than feels reasonable is basically my whole personality outside this room too) when the door went.

Mr Harris didn't knock so much as arrive already mid-sentence, the way teachers do when they're between two other things and this is just the corridor, they happen to be passing through.

"Sue, have you still got the..." He stopped.

I watched him actually see the room. Not glance at it; see it, the way you see a room you thought you already knew and suddenly don't. No half-made mortise joints on the vices. No keyrings queued up on the drying rack waiting for a coat of varnish. Just benches covered in card and felt and index cards with strangers' names on them, and thirty Year 8s deep in a kind of concentration that apparently did not look, to him, like Design and Technology.

"...what exactly are they making, Sue?"

It wasn't sharp. That's the thing I want to get right, because if I tell it wrong, you'll picture something it wasn't. He sounded, more than anything, like a man who'd walked into the wrong room and was too polite to say so directly.

"They're not making yet," said Ms Tan. Calm. Level. The exact voice she uses for 'pass the trimmer.' *"It's a designing unit. Year 8 contextual challenge; we talked about this back in September, it's on the scheme of..."*

"This isn't the rotation that's on the scheme of work I signed off." Not raised. Just very flat, the way a floor is flat, which is somehow worse than a slope.

"It's an adapted version of..." Ms Tan started, and then didn't finish it. I watched her not finish it. She'd been about to explain something (the title, probably, the generic-sounding title that had gone past him in September without either of them looking at it too closely) and then she simply stopped, mid-word almost, and didn't pick it back up, and said instead, evenly, *"It's working. They're engaged. I can show you the plan whenever's good for you."*

Nobody else in the room seemed to notice any of this particularly. Kyle was still narrating his lamp's electrical journey to anyone in a two-metre radius. But I notice things. It is, I am increasingly coming to accept, the actual central fact of my personality, more central than being trans, more central than liking felt more than most people my age like felt, more central than anything; I notice the tone under the tone, the sentence someone almost says and then swallows, the half-second where two adults hold eye contact just slightly too long because neither one wants to be the first to look away in front of an audience of children.

Mr Harris held it for that half-second. Then he looked at his watch, which I don't think he needed to, and said, "*We'll pick this up later,*" and left to go and find whatever it was he'd actually come in for.

Four words. Worse than if he'd said more. If he'd said more, at least it would have been over.

Ms Tan had maybe four seconds (I counted, more or less, the way you count the gap between lightning and thunder without meaning to) where something moved across her face that I couldn't have named if you'd paid me. Then it was gone, and she clapped her hands once, and said, "*Right! Fifteen minutes left, I want to see where everyone's Tuesdays have got to,*" and carried on teaching, immediately, competently, as if a door had simply opened and shut on its own, the wind, nothing to see.

I didn't feel sorry for her. I want to be precise about that, because it would be the easy thing to say and it isn't true. What I felt was closer to recognition; the specific, oddly steadying feeling of watching someone do, in front of you, the exact thing you do yourself most days, which is keep your face working properly while something underneath it has gone somewhere else entirely.

The bell went. Stools scraped. Somebody complained, loudly and at length, about a French vocabulary test nobody had mentioned until this exact moment. Priya packed the shrine away with the enormous care of someone transporting a bomb. None of it looked, from the outside, like a lesson where anything had happened at all.

I packed my pouch away properly (folder, front pocket, zipped) and walked out into the corridor behind Priya, who was already deep into a theory about whether Aled's shrine needed a plaque, and I didn't say anything about what I'd seen, not to her, not to anyone, because I didn't yet have anywhere to put it.

‘Adults do this too,’ was as far as I’d got, by the time we reached the canteen doors. Adults stand at the front of a room and keep their voice level while something underneath the voice is doing something else entirely.

I filed it away. I did not, at the time, know what I was filing it away ‘for.’

I just knew I wanted to keep it.



Episode 5: Work in Progress

(or: Show Your Working)

The idea is coming together. So, quietly, is Violet.

Nobody mentioned it.

That was, in its own way, the strangest part of the week between Episode Four and this one, if you'll allow me to call it that, given how I've apparently decided to tell you all this. Mr Harris did not reappear. There was no assembly about scheme-of-work integrity, no memo pinned to the staffroom door, no visible aftermath of any kind, and by Monday I had almost convinced myself I'd built the whole thing up out of nothing more than a half-second of eye contact and my own general tendency to notice things that would be more restful left unnoticed. Almost. 'We'll pick this up later' is not the kind of sentence that evaporates just because a week goes past without incident. It's the kind of sentence that goes quiet. Which is different.

Wednesday came round again anyway, because that is the one reliable thing about Wednesdays.

"Right," said Ms Tan, and I noticed, because I notice everything, that she looked exactly the same as she always did, which either meant nothing had happened or meant she was extremely good at her job. Possibly both. *"Last week you tested. This week you refine. There's a difference, and I want you to feel it."*

She held up two things: a rough card shape, the kind of thing any of us might have made in week one, all straight lines and good intentions, and next to it something smaller and neater, cut from

actual fabric, with an edge that had clearly been considered rather than simply arrived at.

“This,” she said, holding up the rough one, “is an idea. This...” the neat one... “is a decision that’s been asked some hard questions and survived them. Refining isn’t making it prettier. It’s making it ‘true.’ Today I want you working in your actual material. Not card. Not felt, if felt was only ever your stand-in. The real thing, or as close to the real thing as Baz’s stores will stretch to.”

Baz, from the store cupboard, said something that might have been agreement and might have been a considered opinion about Kyle’s continued proximity to the pillar drill. It was hard to tell from the tone alone, which is, I have come to understand, exactly how Baz likes it.

I had brought in my own fabric. I want that on the record too, because it is the first time in this entire project I had done anything ‘before’ being told to, on purpose, at home, on a Tuesday evening, digging through the good box in the sewing basket Mum keeps under the stairs (the one with the button tin and the zip that’s been stuck since before I was born) for something in the right sort of dark green, the kind that doesn’t announce itself. I found a scrap of an old coat lining. Nobody had asked me to bring anything. I brought it anyway, and told myself it was practical, which it was, and also wasn’t the whole story.

Ms Tan noticed the fabric before she noticed anything else about my bench, which tells you something about how her eye works.

“That’s not felt,” she said.

“No.”

“Where’s it from?”

“An old coat. My mum’s, I think. Or my nan’s. Nobody actually knows any more, it’s just always been in the box.”

“Good,” she said, in the specific tone she uses when a thing has passed some test I didn’t know was being administered. *“Materials with a history behave differently under the needle than materials that came out of a packet this morning. You’ll feel it. Go on.”*

Drafting the actual pattern took most of the middle of the lesson, and I am not going to pretend to you that it was thrilling in any conventional sense, because it mostly involved a lot of squared paper, a ruler, and me getting genuinely cross with a seam allowance that refused to be the width I wanted it to be no matter how many times I measured it. But there is a particular kind of quiet that comes with doing something exact, properly, with your whole attention, that I have never once experienced in French or in maths or in the twenty-five minutes of PE I manage to survive before finding a reason to be near the first-aid kit, and I was, again, mildly furious to notice I was experiencing it here, in a room that smelled of MDF and other people’s lunch.

I was cutting the fabric (properly, this time, the coat lining pinned flat, the paper pattern weighted down with a couple of Baz’s spare washers because the pin box had mysteriously vanished, again, for the third week running) when Aditi Varma stopped at my bench on her way back from the bin.

I should tell you about Aditi, because I haven’t yet and she deserves better than turning up unexplained. Aditi is the person Mr Rutherford means when he talks about the trust’s ‘high-attaining cohort’ in assemblies, in the tone of a man discussing a good harvest. She is extremely good at nearly everything, in the specific way that comes from actually caring whether things are correct, and she does not, as a rule, have much patience for anyone who

seems to be doing something ‘on purpose’ that looks, from the outside, like doing it wrong.

She picked up the pouch (the felt one, the finished mock-up, because the fabric version wasn’t holdable yet) and turned it over the way you’d turn over something you were considering not buying.

“So, *it just folds shut*,” she said. Not a question, exactly. More a verdict, arriving early.

“Yeah.”

“*What’s actually holding it, though.*”

“*The angle of the fold. It’s cut on the diagonal, so the fabric’s own...*”

“*But what if it doesn’t*,” said Aditi, which is a sentence I have thought about more since than I would like to admit. “*What if she’s rushing, or it’s wet, or she’s carrying something and it catches on something. You haven’t got a fastening. You’ve got a hope.*”

I want to tell you I had a brilliant answer ready, the way I’d had one for Ms Tan back in Episode (lesson) Three, out of nowhere, before I’d decided to say it. I didn’t. What I had was a small, cold drop of the exact same doubt Aditi had just handed me, landing somewhere in the region of my stomach and setting up camp there for the rest of the lesson.

“*It’s not a hope*,” I said, eventually, which is not the same as a good comeback, but was the best I could do under pressure from someone who had never in her life handed in something unfinished. “*It’s a decision. Ms Tan said...*”

“*I’m not saying Ms Tan’s wrong*,” said Aditi, in the reasonable, slightly withering tone of somebody who has never once considered that she might be. “*I’m saying you’ve made something*

that looks finished and isn't tested. Those aren't the same thing. You tested it against Ms Tan asking you nice questions. You haven't tested it against an actual Tuesday." And then, because the bell for the end of the lesson doesn't wait for anybody's crisis of confidence, she put the pouch back down exactly where she'd found it, said, *"Anyway. Good colour,"* and went back to her own bench, where (I noticed, because I notice everything) she was building something with considerably more visible fastenings than mine, and considerably less of whatever the felt pouch had that made Ms Tan stop and pick it up two weeks running.

I did not enjoy the rest of that lesson in the way I had enjoyed the last two.

It wasn't that I thought Aditi was right, exactly. It was that I couldn't immediately prove she was wrong, and there is a specific flavour of horrible that comes from having built something you'd started, quietly, to be a bit proud of, and then having someone hold it up to the light and ask a question you don't have an answer for yet. I cut the rest of my pattern pieces with rather less of the calm I'd had at the start of the lesson, and more of a background hum of 'what if she's right, what if I've made something pretty instead of something that works', which is not a comfortable hum to cut fabric to.

Priya, who misses very little despite giving the constant impression of missing everything, appeared at my elbow somewhere in the last twenty minutes holding Aled's shrine, which had, since I last properly looked at it, developed what appeared to be a small solar panel of its own, entirely unprompted, as if it had been listening to Ms Tan's shears speech and taken it personally.

"You've gone quiet," she said. *"You go quiet in a specific way when Aditi's said something to you. Everyone goes quiet in that specific*

way after Aditi's said something to them. It's basically a house style at this point."

"She's not wrong to ask, though. That's the annoying bit."

"She's not wrong to ask," Priya agreed. "She is, however, allergic to anything that isn't obviously, visibly, load-bearingly finished, and has been since Year Seven, and once told me my times tables project 'lacked rigour,' which, Violet, it was a poster about the seven times table, I was eleven." She set the shrine down and looked at my pouch properly, turning it the way Aditi had, except slower, and without the verdict already loaded. *"It held when she pulled at it, though. I watched. She gave it a proper tug, and it didn't come open."*

"She didn't try very hard."

"She tried exactly as hard as Aditi tries at anything, which is fully," said Priya. *"I'm not saying build twelve more of them to be sure. I'm saying you're doing the thing where one person's opinion outweighs everyone else's, including the actual teacher's, including your own eyes, and I think you should stop, because it's boring to watch and I have my own shrine crisis to be dealing with."*

She had, as she often does, a point that I didn't want to have made to me and went back to interrogating whatever the solar panel thought it was doing there.

Ms Tan came round in the last ten minutes, the way she always does, checking benches rather than marking them, and stopped rather longer than usual at mine; not because the pattern pieces were remarkable, they weren't, they were paper and pins and one slightly wonky seam allowance, but because I think she'd clocked, the way she clocks everything, that something had shifted in the room's weather since the lesson began.

"You've gone careful," she said. Not unkindly. Just accurate.

"Aditi thinks the fastening's not tested enough."

"Is she wrong?"

I opened my mouth to say 'yes, obviously,' and found I couldn't quite get there.

"I don't know," I said instead, which felt like admitting something, though I couldn't have told you what.

"Good," said Ms Tan, which was not the answer I wanted. *"That's not me agreeing with Aditi, by the way. It's me agreeing that 'not knowing yet' is a completely honest place to be in week five of an eight-week project. The version of you that had no doubts at all would be the version I'd actually be worried about. Doubt's not the opposite of a good idea. Sometimes it's just what a good idea feels like from the inside, before you've finished proving it."* She nodded at the paper pattern. *"Test it properly before lesson six. Not against me being nice to you. Against an actual Tuesday, like she said. She's not wrong about that part, whatever else she is."*

Then she moved on to Kyle, whose lamp had apparently developed a second, entirely unplanned function that involved a faint burning smell, and I sat there with a paper pattern, a length of borrowed coat lining, and the specific unglamorous feeling of being neither as finished nor as wrong as I'd been half an hour ago.

I packed the pieces away flat, between two sheets of card so the pins wouldn't catch on anything, and put the whole bundle in the front pocket where the pouch usually lived, and walked out of that lesson feeling less like someone who'd made progress and more like someone who'd been handed a proper, unresolved question to carry around for a week, which is, I am beginning to suspect,

roughly what ‘work in progress’ actually means, underneath the cheerful sound of it.

I did not mention any of this to Callum, who would not have understood the fastening problem, or to Mum, who was on a late shift and asleep before I got the chance. I put the bundle on my windowsill instead, where I could see it from my bed, and lay there for longer than I meant to, thinking about tension, and geometry, and whether a thing can be true and untested at the same time, or whether that’s just another way of saying ‘not sure yet.’

Outside, somebody’s dog was barking at absolutely nothing, the way dogs do, with total conviction, and I thought, not for the first time, that I understood the impulse.



Episode 6: Back to the Drawing Board

(or: Under Pressure)

Ms Tan is holding it together. Just about. Violet notices.

Historic Greencutting (HG) is what survives of the Hollis & Marsh Edge Tool Works: four buildings, one chimney, a gatepost, and a rectangle of hardstanding where the drop-forge used to be.

It sits in a fold of the valley between the canal and the railway cutting, ten minutes' walk from the market and rather less from the gym.

FROM THE GREENCUTTING TOURIST INFORMATION BROCHURE.

I tested it against an actual Tuesday, because I'd been told to, and because (though I'd have denied this under any reasonable questioning) I'd started to mind whether Aditi was right.

Here is the correct way to test a thing, which I worked out myself, over the course of one evening, without anyone telling me: you do not test it with the actual precious object. Deb has one photograph of her mother and if I were Deb I would not be trusting it to a prototype some kid made out of an old coat lining, and neither would you. So I tested it with a two-pence coin and a folded-up receipt from the Nisa, which are the correct weight and shape and which I did not care about losing, and I put the pouch on under my

jumper the way Deb would wear it, fastened before I was properly awake, and I went about a normal rushed morning (bag, stairs, Callum shouting about the last of the milk, out the door) to see whether the diagonal fold held.

It held. Right up until I got caught in the rain at the bus stop for four minutes, and then it didn't.

That was the thing Aditi had actually been right about, and I want to give her the credit even though it cost me something to do it, because being right about the wet was the whole game. The coat lining, once it was damp, went soft and stopped pulling against itself the way dry fabric does, and the clever self-closing tension I'd been so quietly pleased with just... relaxed. Opened its hand. The two-pence coin was somewhere on the floor of the number 47 by the time I noticed, and the receipt was a papier-mâché tragedy, and if either of them had been my mum's face I would have wanted to lie down in the road.

So I fixed it. Not with a popper, not with a magnet, not with anything you'd have to remember or fasten or lose. I cut a slit in the body of the pouch and shaped the closing corner into a point, so that the point tucks through the slit and holds itself there by being physically posted into place rather than by hoping the fabric stayed tense. One piece. Nothing added. It works dry, it works wet, it works one-handed with a flask in the other hand and it works when you're not awake yet, because tucking a thing into a slot is a movement your fingers can do before your brain's caught up. I tested it in the sink, actually held it under the running tap, and it stayed shut, and I stood in the kitchen at half nine at night feeling like I'd got away with something.

I could not wait to show Ms Tan. That is a sentence I did not expect to ever write about a lesson, and there it is.

Except.

I knew before she'd said a word that today was not going to be the day for it. You learn a room, if you're me (you learn its ordinary weather so well that the smallest change in pressure registers like a dropped stitch) and the moment I came in I could feel that the front of the workshop was wrong. Ms Tan wasn't at the door. She was at her desk, which she is basically never at, with the laptop open and a lever-arch file next to it that I'd not seen before, fat with plastic wallets, and a mug of something she clearly wasn't drinking, and she did the register from where she sat instead of standing, quick, still right, still 'Violet, next name,' but quick, in a way that meant the register was a thing to get through rather than a thing she was doing.

"Right," she said, and stood, and it was the same 'right' as always except that it cost her something to make it, which I could see and I don't think anyone else could. *"Refining. Where we were last week. You've got your material, you've got your problems to solve, you know what you're doing. Off you go."*

And that was it. No demonstration.

I want to explain why that mattered, because from the outside it looks like nothing (a teacher skipped a bit) but the demonstration is 'the thing she does.' It's the whole engine of how she teaches. She doesn't tell you, she shows you, badly, on purpose, thinking out loud, and you catch it off her the way you catch a cold. Every single lesson since January she has stood at that front bench and made a bad version of something in front of us and binned it cheerfully and shown us that binning it was allowed. And today she just... didn't. She sent us off with words instead. Told, not shown. And I sat there thinking: she's teaching the way she'd teach if she was thinking

about something else the whole time, which is the way everybody else in this school teaches, and which she never, ever does.

I got on with it, because there wasn't anything else to do, and because the pouch was genuinely finished now and I wanted at least to have it out and ready in case she came round.

Priya's shrine had, over the intervening week, achieved what she was now calling "*phase four*."

"It has a doorbell," she told me, without being asked. "Don't. I know. I'm aware. Aled doesn't get visitors because Aled is deceased, so the doorbell is, and I quote myself here, 'a poignant statement about isolation in the modern afterlife.' I said that to Ms Tan's face last week and she wrote it down. This week I don't think she'd hear me if I set it off."

"You noticed as well, then."

"I notice you noticing," said Priya, which is a different thing, and true, and the closest either of us was going to get to saying it out loud.

Mr Rutherford came in at twenty past.

He didn't come in the way Mr Harris had come in, mid-sentence, needing something. He came in the way weather comes in; no knock, no reason given, a tablet held flat against his chest like a clipboard from a more expensive century. He didn't speak to Ms Tan and he didn't speak to us. He stood near the back, by Aditi's bench, and he watched, and every so often he tapped something on the tablet with one finger, and the tapping was somehow the loudest thing in the room even though it made no sound at all.

A learning walk. I know the phrase now; I didn't then, I just knew the shape of it. Nobody had to explain that it mattered, because you

could read exactly how much it mattered off the back of Ms Tan's neck, which had gone very straight, and off the fact that her voice, when she talked to Kyle about his lamp, got slightly more careful, slightly more full of the words that go in reports ('iterative,' 'purposeful,' 'user need'); words she uses with us normally but not like that, not lined up on display in a row for someone at the back to tick off.

He was there four minutes. He tapped the tablet perhaps six times. Then he came past my bench on his way out, and paused, and looked at the pouch sitting there in its finished state, and I had a wild, disloyal half-second of wanting him to pick it up and be impressed, wanting the tap on the tablet to be a good tap, a tap that helped her; and then he said, to me, pleasantly, "*And what are we learning today?*" in the voice adults use when the answer is not the point, and I said, "*Iterative design against a user need,*" giving him his own words straight back because I am not an idiot, and he said "*Lovely,*" and tapped the tablet one more time, and left.

I have no idea whether that tap was a good tap. That's the thing about the machinery; it doesn't tell you. It just taps, and leaves, and lets you find out in a meeting you're not invited to.

Ms Tan had the four seconds again.

I'd seen them before (Episode Four, the doorway, Mr Harris and his 'we'll pick this up later') that exact four seconds where something crosses a person's face and then gets folded away and they carry on as if the folding cost nothing. I knew what I was looking at this time. I'd filed the first one away without knowing what for, and here was the what for: so that when it happened again I'd recognise it fast enough to do the one useful thing available to me, which was nothing. Which was: not make it worse. Not ask if she was okay. Not do the kind, clumsy, unbearable thing a nicer and stupider

person would do, which is walk up to a teacher who is holding herself together by main force in front of thirty children and ‘draw attention to it.’

So when she came round to my bench a few minutes later (later than usual, tireder than usual, running on the fumes of whatever the file and the laptop and the tablet had left her) I didn’t show her the pouch like a kid wanting a gold star.

I asked her a boring question instead.

“The tuck closure,” I said, and held it up, and demonstrated the slit and the point going home, just once, flat, like it was a technical query and not the thing I’d been vibrating to show her all lesson.

“Does that count as one component or two? For the folder. I didn’t know how to write it up.”

It was a real question and it was also a gift, and I think she knew it was both, because she looked at the pouch, and then she looked at me, and for just a second the tiredness went out of her face and the actual person came back into it, the one who stops and picks your thinking up off the bench without asking.

“One,” she said. *“It’s one piece of material doing two jobs. That’s not a component, that’s a ‘decision,’ and it’s a better one than the tension fold, because you tested the tension fold and it failed and you didn’t fall in love with it, you fixed it.”* She turned the pouch over once, found the slit, pushed the point home herself, felt it hold. Something in her let go by about two per cent. *“You tested it wet.”*

“Bus stop. Rain. Lost a two-pence.”

“Course you did,” she said, and there was the ghost of the real her, the January her, in it. *“Write it up exactly like that. The two-pence and the rain. That’s your evidence. That’s the whole story of the project in one sentence and it’s better than anything you’ll put in*

the actual folder.” She put the pouch down where she’d found it.
“Well done, Violet. Genuinely.”

And then she straightened up, and the effort of straightening up was visible, at least to me, and she moved on to the next bench, and I understood (properly, for the first time, in a way I hadn’t at the doorway in Episode Four) that she had just spent something she did not have very much of today, on me, on a pouch, on getting it right for one student, on the last Wednesday before half-term with a lever-arch file waiting on her desk and a tablet somewhere in the building filling up with taps about her.

I did not feel sorry for her. I keep saying that and I keep meaning it. What I felt was that I would have carried the file for her if she’d let me, and that she was never going to let me, and that both of those things were correct.

The bell went. It was the last D&T lesson before half-term, so there was the particular loose, exploded energy of a room full of people who don’t have to be anywhere for nine days, coats on before the bell had finished, Kyle’s lamp being carried out at a worrying angle, Priya bearing the shrine and its doorbell away like a reliquary.

“Nine days,” she said, at the door. *“Nine days without Aled. I don’t know who I am without a dead man to design for. What are you going to do with yourself?”*

I had the pouch in my hand. Finished, tested, tucked shut, holding nothing yet.

“Dunno,” I said. *“Nothing. Probably nothing.”*

I put it in the front pocket of my bag, tucked closed, the way Deb would carry it, and I did not tell Priya that I already knew exactly what I was going to spend at least part of half-term doing, which was thinking about a woman I’d never met, standing very straight at

the front of a cold room, folding something away where the children couldn't see it, and carrying on.

I'd got quite good, by then, at recognising it.

I was only just starting to wonder what it cost.



Episode 7: Second Sitting

(or: Reassembly)

Half-term's over. Something in the room feels different; and it isn't just the room.

Here is what I did with nine days off: not much, and also, apparently, this.

Half-term on Marsh Fields is a specific kind of long. Mum was on days the first week and nights the second, which meant the flat was either full of her being asleep or full of her being about to be asleep, and you learn to move through it quietly, like weather that's decided not to commit. Callum had his shifts at the retail park, on the exact patch of ground where Hollis & Marsh used to make the shears Ms Tan had held up in Episode One, which is a thing I only thought about because of Ms Tan holding up the shears, which is the first sign that something had gone wrong with me. Before this term I did not walk past a gym on a retail park and think about what the building used to be. Now I can't not.

That's the thing nobody warns you about a project that's any good. It doesn't stop when the lesson does. It just moves in. I'd be doing something completely unrelated (queuing in the Nisa, half-watching something Callum had on) and Deb Hargreaves would surface, uninvited, fifty-eight and standing at a sorting belt at five in the morning, and I'd find myself thinking about whether the tuck closure would work with cold hands, gloved hands, hands that had been doing the same movement for three hours. I redid the slit twice over half-term. Nobody asked me to. There was no lesson to hand it in to. I just couldn't leave it alone, which is not a sentence I

have ever been able to say about homework, because homework has the decency to end.

I did think about Ms Tan. I'm not going to pretend I didn't, since I told you at the end of Episode Six that I would. But thinking about a teacher over half-term is a fairly useless activity, because there's nothing to think 'with,' no new information, just the last thing you saw, running on a loop. The straight back of her neck. The tablet filling up with taps. The four seconds. I'd wonder how the meeting had gone, the one I wasn't invited to, the one the taps were feeding into, and then I'd remember that I had no way of knowing and never would, and that wondering was just worry wearing a smarter coat. So mostly I designed pouches in my head instead, which was more productive and considerably less frightening.

Then it was Wednesday again, and I went back, and the room had changed.

I mean physically. The first thing was the smell, which was 'wrong' in a way that took me a second to place, and then I placed it: clean. Baz had done the store cupboard. Nine days, no children, one man and his particular idea of order, and the whole cupboard had been emptied, sorted, and put back according to a logic that I suspect only Baz will ever fully hold in his head, but which was undeniably 'a' logic, where before there had been geological strata. There was a label maker involved. There were labels.

"Before you ask," said Baz, from within, not looking up, "yes. And it was behind the three-phase isolator, where somebody" (a pause of genuinely operatic weight) "had put it, in January, and where it has sat, defying the natural order, ever since."

The pin box. Missing since before Episode Four. Recovered, alphabetised, and placed on a shelf at the front of the cupboard with what I can only describe as a small handwritten sign reading

PINS, in capitals, in Baz's hand, as if the pins themselves had been on some kind of journey and this was their homecoming.

But that wasn't the difference. Or it was, but it wasn't the one that mattered.

The walls were the difference.

Somebody had put our work up. Not finished objects; there weren't any finished objects, that was the whole point, that was the thing Mr Harris had walked in and failed to find in Episode Four. What was up on the walls was the 'middle' of the work. The persona cards, enlarged and pinned in a row: Deb Hargreaves and Ryan's dog walker and Priya's deceased Aled, blown up big enough to read across the room. The ugly first ideas, the ones we'd binned in Episode Two, photographed and printed and displayed 'because' they were ugly, with a header over them in Ms Tan's handwriting that said THE ONES THAT DIDN'T SURVIVE – AND WHY. Sketches with the crossings-out left in. My 'quietly does its job,' in my own terrible biro, photographed and stuck up where anyone could see it.

I stood and looked at that for longer than I'd admit. It's an odd thing, seeing the inside of your own head on a wall. Odder still to see it framed as though it mattered; not the neat final version, but the working-out, the bit you're supposed to hide.

And I understood, standing there, that this was not decoration. I didn't have the words for it that I have now, but I could feel the shape of it: that after a term of being told, quietly, by tablets and lever-arch files and men who tap and leave, that this unit could not be measured and therefore might not count; she had put the unmeasurable thing on the wall. In capitals. Where the head of department has to walk past it to get to the store cupboard. That is

not what you do when you've been told off and gone quiet. That is what you do when you've decided something.

Whether she'd decided it because the meeting went well or because it went badly, I could not tell you. That's the part I still didn't get to know. Both look the same from the wall.

"Right," said Ms Tan, and she was (I watched for it, I'd got good at watching for it) steadier than the last Wednesday before half-term. Not fixed. I don't think steadier is the same as fixed and I've stopped assuming it is. But she stood at the front to take the register, and she did a demonstration, an actual one, the first in a fortnight, making a bad thing on purpose and binning it cheerfully, 'her doing the thing,' back again, and something in me unclenched that I hadn't clocked was clenched.

"Two lessons left," she said. *"Next week's the review; the proper one, everyone, everyone's work, out on the benches, and we walk round and we ask each other the hard questions, the Tuesday questions, out loud. So today is your last working lesson. Today you get everything into the state you'd want a stranger to see it in. Not perfect. 'Honest.' I want the working-out in the folder, not just the answer. The stuff on those walls..."* she nodded at them, and didn't make a speech about it, which was somehow more than if she had: *"that's the assessment. Not the pouch. Not the lamp. The thinking that got you there. Get it down."*

Aditi came over about halfway through. I'd been half-expecting it and half-dreading it, because the last time Aditi had come to my bench she'd taken something I was proud of and shown me the hole in it, and been right, and I'd spent a fortnight and a lost two-pence proving her right.

She picked up the pouch. Found the slit without being shown. Tucked the point home, felt it hold, gave it the same proper tug she'd given it in Episode Five, back when it was only a hope.

It held.

She turned it over once more, and I braced for the verdict, the early-arriving verdict she deals in.

"You tested it wet," she said.

"Bus stop. Rain. Lost a two-pence."

"Good," said Aditi. And that was all, and from Aditi that is a very great deal, and we both knew it, and neither of us was going to make it into a thing. She put the pouch back. *"Mine's got a battery problem,"* she added, almost grudgingly, as though admitting a design had a problem was a currency she'd only just discovered she could spend. *"I've been pretending it hasn't for a week."*

"Nobody ever thinks about the battery," I said, which is Ms Tan's line, and Aditi almost smiled, which on Aditi is a full standing ovation, and went back to her bench to stop pretending about her battery.

Priya, for the record, had abandoned the shrine.

"Aled has gone to a better place," she announced, *"which is the recycling, because over half-term I looked at it with fresh eyes and realised I had designed a fire hazard shaped like grief. I have started again. This is Aled Two. Aled Two is 'restrained.'"* Aled Two appeared to be a small, dignified box. It had no doorbell. It had no solar panel. It had, as far as I could see, no opinions whatsoever, which for Priya represented a spiritual growth so enormous I didn't dare comment on it in case I frightened it back into complexity.

Near the end, Mr Harris came past in the corridor. I saw him through the wired glass in the door; not coming in, just passing, on his way somewhere with a stack of the green options booklets under his arm, the Year 9 ones, the ones the year above us were all suddenly holding and arguing about, 'choices, choices, what are you picking.' He slowed at the display outside the door, the bit of it that had spilled out into the corridor. He stopped, actually, for a second. Looked at the wall of ugly binned ideas under Ms Tan's capitals. I couldn't see his face from where I was, only the back of him, only that he stood there a second longer than a man just passing would stand, and then went on, booklets under his arm, to wherever heads of department go.

I don't know what that second meant. I've decided I'm allowed not to know. Some things you file away not because you've understood them but because you can tell they're going to matter later, and this book (if I'm honest about how I'm telling it) is partly a list of things I filed away before I understood them.

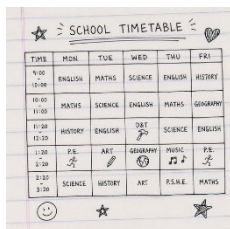
I packed up slowly. It was second sitting for lunch, so there was no rush, D&T-then-late-lunch being the one timetable mercy of my week, and I found I was in no hurry to leave anyway, which was new. I looked at the pouch, tested and tucked and finished, holding nothing yet, and at the walls with the inside of everyone's heads on them, and at the fact that there was exactly one working lesson left, and I felt something I had genuinely never once felt about a lesson in a year and a half at this school, which was that I didn't want it to be nearly over.

I'd spent all of January waiting for this project to end.

Now there was one Wednesday left, and I was already, quietly, trying to work out how a person might arrange to keep doing this; not next week, but next 'year,' the year of the green booklets, the

year of 'choices, choices:' and I hadn't said that to anyone, and I wasn't going to, not yet.

But I'd started to carry it. The way you carry a thing you've decided to keep.



★ > SCHOOL TIMETABLE < ♥

TIME	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI
9:00 10:00	ENGLISH	MATHS	SCIENCE	ENGLISH	HISTORY
10:00 11:00	MATHS	SCIENCE	ENGLISH	MATHS	GEOGRAPHY
11:00 12:00	HISTORY	ENGLISH	ART	SCIENCE	ENGLISH
1:00 2:00	P.E.	ART	GEOGRAPHY	MUSIC	P.E.
2:00 3:00	SCIENCE	HISTORY	ART	P.S.K.E.	MATHS

😊 ★ ★

Episode 8: Options

(or: The Crit)

Last lesson of the unit. Last chance to decide what happens next; for both of them.

*Design and technology is an inspiring, rigorous and practical subject. Using creativity and imagination, pupils design and make products that solve real and relevant problems within a variety of contexts, considering their own and others' needs, wants and values... **Pupils learn how to take risks, becoming resourceful, innovative, enterprising and capable citizens.** Through the evaluation of past and present design and technology, they develop a critical understanding of its impact on daily life and the wider world. High-quality design and technology education makes an essential contribution to the creativity, culture, wealth and well-being of the nation.*

EXCERPT FROM THE PURPOSE OF STUDY FROM THE PROGRAMME OF STUDY
FOR DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY, IN THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM FOR
ENGLAND (2013) — EMPHASIS MINE

By the first Wednesday in March, the green booklets were everywhere.

Not for us, for Year 9, the year above, who had gone from being people who mostly ignored us to people who stood about in

corridors in urgent clumps, holding the booklets open at different pages and saying things like ‘you can’t do triple science and music, the blocks clash’ in the tones of people discussing a hostage situation. Options. Choices, choices. The whole school had gone quietly feverish with it, the way it does every spring apparently, and I had no reason to care, because my year didn’t choose anything until next year.

I want that on record: no reason to care. Hold that thought.

The workshop, when I got there, had been rearranged. Benches pushed into islands, stools cleared back, and every island laid out like a stall at a very specific market, everyone’s project out on display, folders open beside them, the persona cards propped up so you could see who each thing had been for. Nine weeks of work with the working-out showing. Ms Tan stood at the front with the room already arranged around her, which is a trick I still don’t know how she does, and waited for us to notice.

“Today nobody makes anything,” she said. “Today is the review. Here’s how it works. Half of you stand with your work. Half of you walk. Walkers, you stop, you look, and you ask the person one hard question. Not a mean question. A ‘Tuesday’ question. Does it survive contact with a real Tuesday; you all know the shape of it by now. Then we swap. And before anyone asks...” she stepped sideways, and I saw that there was one more island, at the front, with a torch on it made of card and a binned clip beside it and a persona card propped up saying ALLOTMENT-OWNER, 2050... *“my work’s out too. Same rules. Somebody had better ask me something hard or I’ll be very disappointed in all of you.”*

That got a laugh, and the laugh did something to the room; loosened it, the way the first joint you cut loosens the wood. We were off.

I was a walker first, which suited me, because walking and looking is the thing I am actually built for, and it turns out a crit is just noticing with permission. I asked Ryan how the dog walker charged now, and he said, with the weary pride of a man who has been through something, *“Kinetic. Off the dogs. The dogs are the battery,”* which is genuinely clever and I told him so. I asked Kyle what his lamp was ‘for,’ and he looked at it for a while and said, *“Kyle,”* which is either the worst answer to a design question I’ve ever heard or the best one, and I’ve thought about it a lot since and I still can’t decide.

I stopped at Priya’s island longest. Aled Two sat in the middle of it: a small, plain, dignified box, wax-polished, with a lid that fitted so well it sighed when you closed it.

“Go on,” said Priya. *“Ask it. Everyone’s asking it.”*

“What does it do?”

“Nothing,” said Priya, with enormous satisfaction. *“It sits there and holds one thing and doesn’t make a fuss about it. I know. I ‘know.’ Nine weeks and a fire hazard to get here. Ms Tan says the last version is just the first version with the noise taken out. I’m having that put on a T-shirt.”*

Somebody asked Ms Tan a hard question, eventually. It was Aditi, obviously, because it was always going to be Aditi, and the question was a proper one (why the torch clipped to the trowel instead of to the person, when the persona card said the allotment-owner’s problem was her hands being full) and Ms Tan looked at her own design for a long moment and then said, *“I don’t know yet. I think you might be right that it’s on the wrong thing. That one’s going back to the bench,”* and wrote it down, in front of everyone, on her own feedback sheet.

I watched thirty Year 8s watch a teacher be wrong out loud and take a note about it, and I thought: that's the whole unit, really. That's the thing she's been doing since January. Everything else was just materials.

Then it was my turn to stand.

Standing with your work is a very different sport from walking, and I braced for it the way I brace for most things involving being looked at. But here is the strange part, the part I wouldn't have predicted in January: it was fine. Better than fine. People picked the pouch up and I didn't mind, because by now it wasn't a hope, it was a tested thing, and every question anyone asked it was a question I'd already asked it myself in a kitchen at half nine at night with the tap running.

"What goes in it, though?" said Kyle.

I'd thought about this. The two-pence was on the floor of the number 47 and Deb's photograph didn't exist, because Deb didn't exist, except in the way that she now completely did. So, I'd folded the persona card (the actual card, the one from Episode One, the one I meant to bin and carried around for nine weeks instead) down to the size of a photograph, and tucked it inside, and now I opened the pouch one-handed, posted the point back through the slit, and showed him: Deb Hargreaves, riding in the thing that had been designed for her.

"Whatever's the one thing you can't lose," I said. *"That's the brief. Everything else is just pockets."*

And then Mr Harris came in.

Not accidentally, this time. You could tell the difference at a glance; no interrupted sentence, no store-cupboard errand, no stack of booklets under his arm. He came in quietly, at the back,

the way Rutherford had in Episode Six, except that where Rutherford had watched the ‘teaching,’ Mr Harris walked the benches and looked at the ‘work,’ which I understand now is an entirely different thing to be interested in. He didn’t have a tablet. He had his hands behind his back, which is what that generation has instead of a tablet.

He worked his way round. Slowed at Ryan’s kinetic dogs. Picked up Aled Two, turned it over, checked the lid fit with his thumb the way you’d check a coin was real, put it down with a small nod that made Priya stand approximately four inches taller.

And then he was at my island, and he picked up the pouch.

“What’s holding it shut?” he said.

The question of the whole term, asked by the head of department, in a making man’s voice. I took it back off him (you demonstrate, you don’t describe, I’ve learned that much off her) and posted the point through the slit, once, slow enough to follow.

“Nothing,” I said. *“There’s nothing added. The corner’s shaped so it tucks through and holds itself. One piece doing two jobs. It works wet, it works one-handed, and there’s nothing on it to break or lose.”*

Mr Harris took it back. Tried the tuck himself, once, with those enormous careful hands. Looked at it for longer than the object strictly required, the way Baz looks at a screw.

“Tab and slot,” he said, finally. *“Oldest fastening there is. We were doing that in this building before your mother was born: in steel, mind.”* He put it down, exactly where he’d found it, which I noticed, because I notice everything, and because I only knew one other adult who did that. *“Nothing to go wrong. That’s proper, that is.”*

And he moved on, and that was all, and I stood there holding approximately four hundred separate feelings, the largest of which was the completely stupid, completely enormous pride of having made a thing that a man who spent thirty years disagreeing with the way it was taught could pick up and recognise as 'proper.'

He and Ms Tan talked at the end, by the door, briefly, while we packed the islands away. I couldn't hear it and I wasn't meant to. I read what there was to read, which was: her arms folded but her weight easy; his head tipped at the wall display, the ugly binned ideas under her capitals, one eyebrow doing something complicated; a short exchange; one nod each, of exactly equal size, like a trade being agreed rather than a war being won. Then he left. It wasn't peace. I want to be accurate. It was two people who had found one object they could both call proper and were each planning to make entirely different arguments out of it later.

The room emptied the way it does on a last day, loudly and then all at once, and I was slowest packing up, because I was always going to be slowest packing up, today of all days. Ms Tan was stacking persona cards at the front. I put the pouch away (folder, front pocket, zipped, Deb inside it) and then I didn't leave.

"Next year," I said. "When we pick." I was looking at the bench, not at her, because some sentences only come out sideways. *"The green booklets. Is D&T, is it you? Teaching it. At GCSE."*

Ms Tan finished the stack of cards before she answered, which I appreciated, because it meant the answer was getting her full attention rather than her leftover attention.

"If I'm here," she said, "it's me."

"If you're..."

“Ask me in September,” said Ms Tan, and smiled, and it was a real smile with something folded away behind it, and I’d spent nine weeks getting exactly good enough to see both parts at once and to know I wasn’t going to be told which was bigger. *“For what it’s worth, you’d be picking the subject, not the teacher. The subject was here before me and it’ll be here after me, if enough people keep choosing it.”* She handed me the last persona card off the pile, blank, unwritten, next year’s stranger waiting to happen. *“But I’d like to see what you make. Go on. You’ll miss second sitting.”*

I went. Corridor, double doors, the March light doing its pale-but-trying thing across the yard, Priya somewhere ahead of me holding Alled Two like the crown jewels and loudly planning its permanent installation on her nan’s mantelpiece.

Here’s what I know, and what I don’t, walking to lunch on the last Wednesday of the unit.

I know what I’d keep in mine; the pouch, I mean, the one small precious thing you carry through a long day where nobody can take it off you. I’m not telling you what it is. That’s rather the point of the design.

I know that next spring, when the green booklet lands in my hands and the corridors go feverish and somebody says ‘you can’t do that, the blocks clash,’ there is one box I already know I’m ticking, and I have known it, if I’m honest, since a pair of scissors went through a piece of dark green felt in January and the room went quiet in the good way.

What I don’t know is everything else. Whether the scheme of work survives the summer. Whether the wall of ugly ideas stays up, or comes down quietly one INSET day when nobody’s looking. What the taps on the tablet added up to. What was in the lever-arch file. Whether she’s there in September, at the front of a GCSE class,

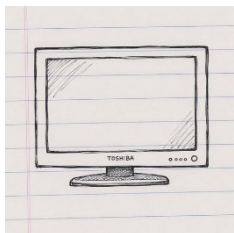
saying 'right' in the way that stops a room; or somewhere else entirely, in a building that never deserved her, or a country that took too long deciding.

If this were television (and I've been telling it to you like it is, I know; episodes, one a week, same time, same channel) this is where the voice would come in over the credits. 'Coming up, in the next episode.' And you'd get thirty seconds of the future, out of order, just enough to ruin your week in the best way.

I don't get the voice. Nobody gets the voice. You just have to come back after the break and find out.

I'm coming back. That's the one part I can tell you for certain.

Same bench. Same channel.



Epilogue

The Making Of...

A postscript, by OK Kitsune

Every series gets a making-of eventually; the featurette after the finale, the cast on a sofa saying how much fun it all was. This is that, except it's also a small act of hypocrisy insurance. In Episode Seven, Ms Tan puts the binned ideas on the wall, crossings-out and all, under a sign that says THE ONES THAT DIDN'T SURVIVE – AND WHY, because she believes the working-out 'is' the work. It would be a bit rich for the book to believe that and then hide its own. So here is the wall.

The book was designed before it was written, using roughly the process it describes. Before any prose existed there were character back stories: persona cards, in effect, for the whole cast, down to what Baz hoards and what Donna Jones gets wrong and keeps trying at. Then a narrative arc: a scheme of work for the novel, eight Wednesdays, with the half-term placed where it would do the most structural good. Then beat sheets: card-and-tape mock-ups of the load-bearing episodes, built to be tested and recut before committing to the real material. Some early ideas didn't survive contact with drafting, and the ones that did survived 'because' they were tested, which the observant reader will recognise as the entire content of Episode Four. The oldest surviving idea in the book is a note from the very first planning document, before there was a plot at all, pairing 'textiles' with 'self-fashioning' and 'joints without glue' with 'things held together by fit

rather than force.’ Nine weeks of fictional lessons later, that note became a tuck-through closure with nothing added and nothing to lose, and a head of department calling it ‘proper.’ First ideas are cheap. The ones that survive you are not.

The arc document named five pedagogical strands the story would carry and promised they’d stay under the surface: argued through Violet and Ms Tan rather than announced. Since the story’s over, they can come up for air.

Innovative pedagogy is the strand wearing the highest-visibility jacket, because it’s what the unit ‘is.’ Ms Tan’s ‘mainly designing’ project comes from a real distinction in the D&T teacher-education literature – the observation that the subject’s classroom default drifts toward ‘mainly making’ (practical skills, tasks, a finished object to mark) when its actual distinctiveness lies in designing – and her vehicle for it, the ‘New Greencutting, 2050’ brief, is design fiction, a genuine published approach that uses speculative contexts to put designerly decision-making at the centre of the task. But the strand’s real spine is the demonstration. Her training told her it was the subject’s signature pedagogy, and the book takes that seriously enough to trace it week by week: a pair of grafted shears standing in for a whole imagined town; an ideation demo run ‘at the speed I actually think, not the speed that looks good;’ a mock-up built badly in public and binned cheerfully; a dog walker interrogated about its battery in front of thirty witnesses. Always showing thinking, not just skill. And then Episode Six, where the demonstration simply ‘isn’t there:’ and Violet, who has never been told the word pedagogy in her life, diagnoses its absence instantly and precisely. You understand a signature pedagogy best the week it goes missing. By the finale it completes its arc: Ms Tan puts her own work on a bench under the same rules as everyone else’s, takes a hard question from a Year 8, and is wrong out loud,

with a note taken. The demonstration was never really about torches or joints. It was a nine-week demonstration of how to hold an idea lightly.

Lesson planning lives in the architecture Violet keeps noticing without knowing she's noticing it. Every double lesson has the same load-bearing frame (the 'right' that stops the room, the demonstration, the long independent middle, the circulation that reads benches rather than marks them) and across the term those frames assemble into a sequence: persona, problem, ideation, selection, first cut, test, refinement, review. That's a design process, delivered as episodes. Crucially, the structure arrives 'progressively:' the brief that terrifies Violet in week one ("*no worksheet with steps*") gets one new rule per week (this week a Tuesday, this week 'one' idea, this week try to break it) so that by the time she'd have needed the scaffolding, it's already under her. This is where the book's quietest thread lives too. Violet is, as the back stories put it, neurodivergent as texture rather than diagnosis: never assessed, never labelled, just a girl for whom an ambiguous open brief is aversive rather than boring, and for whom clear steps, fixed routines, and one exact detail to fixate on are how thinking happens. The unit never treats her as a problem to solve. It just happens to be built the way she needs it built, one rule at a time, and her engagement follows. Good structure is invisible inclusion. Nobody in the book ever says that sentence, which is rather the point.

Curriculum design is the strand that mostly appears as an absence: there is no keyring at the end of this unit, and everyone can feel it. The preface set out the policy weather (a subject squeezed for two decades by a measurement culture that stopped counting it) and inside the story that weather condenses into small, concrete objects: the materials budget Mr Harris has to defend, the

timetable that gives Year 8 one Wednesday morning, and above all the green options booklets that turn the school feverish every spring. The finale is titled after them because curriculum design, at the sharp end, is not a document. It's a thirteen-year-old deciding which box to tick, and a teacher honest enough to tell her, *"You'd be picking the subject, not the teacher. The subject was here before me and it'll be here after me, if enough people keep choosing it."* Every entry statistic in the preface is made of individual Violets, noticing a door.

Change management is the strand where Ms Tan is allowed to get things wrong, because innovation that never costs anything isn't innovation. Her unit goes through on a scheme-of-work title generic enough not to raise flags, her head of department signs it in September without either of them looking too closely, and the bill arrives in Episode Four through a store-cupboard door. The walk-through is written as a failure of 'process,' not of people: Harris is factually right that this isn't what he approved, bewildered before he's sharp, and denied even the satisfaction of finishing the argument (*"we'll pick this up later"* being the most expensive five words in institutional life). What follows is the actual lesson: not a showdown but a long quiet, a learning walk with a tapping tablet, and then Ms Tan's counter-move, which is not a memo but a 'wall' — the unmeasurable made public, in capitals, where the department has to walk past it. The trade at the door in the finale, two nods of exactly equal size, resolves nothing. It isn't meant to. Bringing people along is slower than being right, and the book leaves Ms Tan mid-lesson on that one, on purpose.

Teacher identity is the strand the whole series is secretly for. This book keeps Ms Tan permanently at arm's length; we only ever get her through Violet, which means we get what a watchful thirteen-year-old can see: the four seconds where something crosses a face

and is folded away; the register done sitting down; the display-language (“*iterative, purposeful, user need*”) that comes out when a tablet is in the room; the visible cost of spending attention she doesn’t have on one student’s tuck closure. An early planning note set the rule that she must never become the Wise Mentor who exists to save the protagonist, and the same note gave her the instinct the whole book runs on: ‘a bench, a task, and a door that’s open.’ Her four-second correction in Episode Two (“*It’s Violet,*” mid-list, without looking up) is the book’s thesis on classroom culture: that safety is mostly built out of things treated as unremarkable, and that the deepest pastoral act available to a teacher is sometimes refusing to make a moment into an event. Whether the building she works in deserves her, whether the unit “*worked*” in any way a dashboard can record, whether she’s there in September: the book withholds all of it, because that’s Violet’s honest epistemic position and because it’s the next season’s business.

One last strand was never on the list, because it’s the shape of the thing rather than a thread in it. The preface promised that an episode is a discrete period of learning that links to the ones before and after it; that a unit of work is a serial, not eight unrelated hours. The book’s whole wager is that this is also true of a person. Violet is built across eight instalments the way her pouch is: persona first, then a problem, then six ugly attempts, then one idea chosen almost by accident, tested against rain, refined, and finally held up in public by someone she expected to dismiss it. Nothing in Episode Eight would hold without Episodes One through Seven quietly underneath it. That’s episodic learning. It’s also, more or less, how people happen.

Every making-of ends the same way; the cast on the sofa, saying they can’t wait for you to see what comes next.

I can't.

Same bench. Same channel.

— OK Kitsune

Next Season

Coming up next season, on *The Ms Tan Tales*:

Not this September. The one after that.

There's a year in between (Violet's Year 9, the green booklet, the corridors going feverish every spring, somebody insisting you can't do that because the blocks clash) and we aren't going to sit through it with her, because she told you in March which box she was ticking, and she was never a girl who changed her mind.

But before any of that, a one-off.

Pilot Hole. One story, out of series, a very long way from Greencutting.

Johor Bahru (aka JB), 1999. A girl of twelve at the wrong end of a country from a shop that smelled of oil and cut metal, sent to relatives for reasons this book has never gone into, at a school she had no expectation of loving. A subject that had been on the national timetable for eleven years and in that building for none of them. And a room at the end of a corridor that was being used to store chairs, until the September somebody new arrived and asked for the key.

Everything Ms Tan is, she got in one academic year, in a language this series has not so far had occasion to use, from a person whose name has not once come up in eight episodes. Then the year ended and she went home to Penang, to a school that didn't do it.

Between series. You don't need it to follow what comes next. You'll want it anyway.

Then: September. The one after.

2026. Twenty-two Year 10s on the first Wednesday of the autumn term, and one of them near the window with strong opinions about the good scissors; though this isn't her story anymore, and she'd be the first to tell you so.

This time the camera turns round. Further than you'd think.

Because the person who sees the most of a D&T teacher **isn't** the head of department, and it **isn't** the thirty children, and it is emphatically **not** the man with the tablet. It **is** the one in the store cupboard. The one who opens up at ten past seven, who knows exactly what got ordered and exactly what got used, and who nobody in that building has ever once thought to ask about anything at all.

Baz has the whole of it. Baz is not at all sure he is the man to be telling you.

Coming up: a specification with more content in it than there are Wednesdays. **Booklets.** A morning with nothing to set out and nothing to sharpen. A requisition that comes back halved, and a head of department who is delighted. Mr Harris hasn't gone anywhere, and neither has the argument; except that this time he's right, which is **so** much worse.

Then two weeks in October, and a woman who comes back from them having decided something.

And in the last week of it, a drawer.

New term. New spec. Same channel... and this time you're watching from the cupboard...

A Glossary (for the Uninitiated)

Back matter, for readers outside England... and for a good many inside it

Every profession builds a language to talk to itself with, and English schooling has built a particularly dense one: an acronym for every process, a euphemism for every judgement, and at least three different words for the same hour of the week. Violet uses this language the way any thirteen-year-old does, which is to say fluently and without ever explaining it, because to her it isn't jargon, it's just Wednesday.

What follows is for anyone who found themselves halfway through Episode Four wondering what a *pillar drill* is doing in a school, why a man with a tablet is allowed to walk into a lesson uninvited, or what on earth a *keyring* has to do with a national curriculum crisis.

Two warnings before we start.

This is England, not Britain. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland each run their own education systems, with their own qualifications, inspectorates, and vocabulary. Nearly everything below applies to England alone. Greencutting is in the Midlands, which is very much in England, and its problems are English problems.

Fictional entries are marked †. The trust, the school, the town and everyone in them are invented. Everything unmarked is real, and mostly still going on.

Quick reference: how old is everybody

Year groups and key stages...

ENGLAND	AGES	US/CANADA	STAGE
Year 7	11–12	Grade 6	Key Stage 3
Year 8	12–13	Grade 7	Key Stage 3
Year 9	13–14	Grade 8	Key Stage 3
Year 10	14–15	Grade 9	Key Stage 4
Year 11	15–16	Grade 10	Key Stage 4 (GCSE year)
Years 12–13	16–18	Grade 11–12	Sixth form / Key Stage 5

Violet is in **Year 8**. Callum is in **Year 11**. The Year 9s with the green booklets are choosing the subjects they will sit exams in two years later, which is why the whole school goes quietly mad about it every spring.

1. The shape of a week

Term. The English school year runs in three terms: *autumn* (early September to just before Christmas), *spring* (January to Easter), and *summer* (Easter to late July). The novel takes place across a single spring term.

Half-term. A one-week holiday roughly halfway through each term; and also the name for each half of the term itself. February half-term falls between Episodes Six and Seven, and is one of the few weeks in the book that isn't a Wednesday.

Timetable. The fixed weekly grid of who is taught what, where, and by whom. A subject's standing in a school can be read almost entirely off the timetable: how many hours it gets, which years get them, and whether it gets a double.

Double lesson. Two consecutive periods with no break between them; usually around ninety to a hundred minutes. Practical subjects live or die by whether they get one, because you cannot set up, teach, make, and clear away a workshop in fifty minutes. Ms Tan's Year 8 double on a Wednesday morning is the whole engine of this book.

Register. The formal record of attendance, taken at the start of a session, usually by name from a screen. It is legally required, administratively boring, and (as Episode Two demonstrates) capable of doing enormous damage in about four seconds.

Tutor time / form time / registration. A short daily session, typically first thing, with a *form tutor* and a *form group* (US: homeroom). Notices, attendance, the occasional pastoral conversation.

Assembly. A whole-year or whole-school gathering in a hall, addressed by a member of leadership. Where †Mr Rutherford does his talking about the 'high-attaining cohort.'

Second sitting. Large schools run lunch in two shifts because the dining hall cannot hold everyone. Which sitting you get is determined by your timetable, and is, as Violet notes, either the mercy or the curse of your week.

2. Who runs the school

State school. A school funded from taxation and free to attend. American readers should note the trap: an English **public school** is an expensive private one (Eton, Harrow), and a **private** or **independent** school is what Americans mean by private. Shining Academy is a state school, attended by ordinary children, for free.

Comprehensive. A non-selective state secondary taking all local children regardless of ability; the standard model in *most* of England since the 1960s and 70s. Greencutting Comprehensive is what Shining Academy used to be, and what most people over forty in the town still call it.

Academy. A state school funded directly by central government rather than by the local council, run under a legal funding agreement by a charitable trust. Academies have significant freedoms: they can set their own term dates, their own staff pay and conditions, and (crucially for this story) **they are not legally required to follow the National Curriculum**. They must offer something ‘broad and balanced,’ which is a phrase doing an extraordinary amount of unsupervised work. Most English secondary schools are now academies.

Multi-academy trust (MAT). A single charitable company running several academies, with one board of trustees, one chief executive, central services, and (very often) one set of policies, one data system, and one dashboard. Trusts vary enormously in how much they centralise. †**Bright Lights Trust** is a mid-sized one that centralises quite a lot.

Local authority (LA). The council. Historically ran state schools in its area; now, for most secondaries, retains only a residual role (admissions coordination, some special educational needs duties, safeguarding oversight). Academies sit outside its control, which is rather the point of them.

Principal / Headteacher / Head. The person in charge of a single school. Trusts often prefer ‘Principal,’ partly because it sounds more corporate, partly to reserve ‘Chief Executive’ for the trust level.

Senior Leadership Team (SLT). The head plus deputies and assistants, each holding a portfolio: behaviour, curriculum, data, safeguarding, standards. Referred to collectively, and often warily, as **SLT**. †**Mr Rutherford** is a Vice Principal (Standards) operating at trust level, which means he can appear in any of the trust's schools without warning and does not have to explain himself in any of them.

Head of Department (HoD) / Head of Subject. A teacher who also runs a subject area: the budget, the staffing, the schemes of work, the exam results, the defence of the timetable allocation at meetings. †**Mr Harris** has done this for a long time and is very tired.

Governors / trustees. Volunteers with legal responsibility for the school or trust. They appear in this book only as a distant weather system.

3. Qualifications and the great annual sorting

Key Stage. England divides compulsory schooling into numbered stages. **Key Stage 3** covers Years 7–9 (ages 11–14) and is broad: everybody does everything, including D&T. **Key Stage 4** covers Years 10–11 and is where pupils specialise and sit exams. Almost every argument in this novel is really an argument about what Key Stage 3 is *for*.

GCSE. General Certificate of Secondary Education. The exam taken at 16 in each chosen subject, at the end of Year 11. Graded **9 to 1** in England (9 is highest; 4 is a 'standard pass,' 5 a 'strong pass'). Pupils typically sit eight to ten. D&T was a compulsory GCSE until 2004. It is now one option among many, and a shrinking one.

Options. The process, in Year 9, of choosing which subjects to carry into GCSE. Some subjects are compulsory (English, maths, science). The rest are arranged in **option blocks** (grids that

determine which subjects can be taken alongside which) so a timetabling constraint invented by an administrator in a back office quietly decides what a fourteen-year-old is allowed to become. The **green booklets** in Episode Eight are the options prospectus. This is the single most consequential piece of paper in an English child's school career and it is usually printed on the cheapest available stock.

A Level / sixth form. Post-16 study, ages 16–18, in three or four subjects, usually as a route to university. Beyond the horizon of this book but visible from it.

Cohort. A year group considered as a statistical population rather than as children. Used affectionately by teachers and instrumentally by everyone above them.

4. What gets counted, and by whom

This section is the novel's antagonist.

Department for Education (DfE). The government ministry responsible for schools in England. Its political head is the **Secretary of State for Education**. **Michael Gove** held the post from 2010 to 2014 and appears in the preface in a public capacity, as himself.

National Curriculum. The statutory programme of study for maintained schools in England, specifying what must be taught in each subject at each key stage. D&T is statutory within it at Key Stage 3. Academies are exempt. Hold those two sentences next to each other for a moment.

English Baccalaureate (EBacc). Not a qualification; a performance measure, introduced in 2010, counting the proportion of pupils who achieve GCSEs in a fixed suite of subjects: English,

maths, sciences, a language, and history or geography. D&T is not in it. Neither are art, music, drama or PE. Because schools are published and compared on the measure, the measure quietly reshapes timetables, staffing and option blocks in its own image. This is the central grievance of the preface, and the weather every character in this book is standing in. The government's **Curriculum and Assessment Review**, which reported in November 2025 under Professor Becky Francis, recommended scrapping the EBacc measure altogether; ministers accepted. The novel is set in the spring before that report landed, when nobody yet knew.

Progress 8 / Attainment 8. The headline accountability measures that sit alongside the EBacc: how much progress pupils make across eight qualifications between the end of primary school and GCSE, and what they attain in them. One of the eight 'buckets' (yes, really!) is reserved for EBacc subjects, which is another lever pushing in the same direction. The 2025 Review recommended keeping the structure but renaming that bucket 'Academic Breadth.'

League tables. The annual publication of school performance data, reprinted by newspapers, consumed by parents, and taken very seriously indeed by trusts.

Ofqual. The independent regulator of qualifications and exams. Not the same as Ofsted, though nearly everyone outside England assumes it is.

Ofsted. The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills: the schools inspectorate. Inspects, grades, and publishes. For years it awarded a single overall word (*Outstanding*, *Good*, *Requires Improvement*, *Inadequate*) a judgement of such consequence that it shaped house prices and, on at least one documented occasion, ended a life. The single overall grade was

abolished at the start of the 2024/25 academic year; from November 2025 schools receive a **report card** grading several areas separately on a five-point scale. In spring 2025, when this book is set, schools were in the uneasy gap between the two systems, which is roughly where Ms Tan finds herself as well.

Deep dive. An Ofsted inspection method introduced in 2019: rather than judging a school in the round, inspectors take a small number of subjects and follow each one all the way down: curriculum plans, lesson visits, pupils' work, conversations with teachers and children. It made subject-level curriculum thinking suddenly, urgently visible, which was mostly a good thing, and generated an enormous industry of schools preparing for it, which was mostly not.

Learning walk. A short, often unannounced visit to a lesson by a senior colleague; five minutes, no feedback, notes taken on a tablet. Not formally an observation, which is precisely what makes it so difficult to argue with. Episode Six turns on one.

Data drop. The point in the term when every teacher must enter a grade or projection for every pupil into the school's system, so that leadership can compare, rank, and intervene. The rhythm of the academic year for many teachers is not lesson-to-lesson but drop-to-drop. Ms Tan's problem, in one sentence, is that her unit produces nothing a data drop can eat.

Flight path / target grade. A projected trajectory from a pupil's prior attainment to a predicted GCSE grade, against which they are then measured. Widely used; widely disliked by the people using it.

Work scrutiny / book scrutiny. Collecting in pupils' exercise books to check what has actually been taught and marked. Awkward in a subject whose evidence of learning is a wooden box.

Knowledge-rich curriculum. The dominant English curriculum orthodoxy of the 2010s, drawing on E.D. Hirsch: that a specified, sequenced body of core knowledge, explicitly taught, is the foundation of everything else. There is a serious argument in it. Translated into policy at speed, it tended to privilege *knowing that* over *knowing how*; a distinction that matters rather a lot if your subject's evidence of understanding is a thing you made rather than a fact you can recite.

5. The people in the building

Initial Teacher Training / Education (ITT / ITE). The training year. Multiple routes exist, which is a polite way of putting it.

SCITT. School-Centred Initial Teacher Training: a training route run by a school or group of schools rather than a university, usually with a university partner supplying the accredited academic strand. Ms Tan trained through †Bright Lights Trust's own SCITT.

Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). The licence. What the training year is for.

Early Career Teacher (ECT). Since 2021, newly qualified teachers in England complete a **two-year induction** (ECT1 and ECT2) with a reduced timetable, a mentor, and a statutory training programme. Ms Tan is an **ECT2**: no longer a trainee, not yet established, still close enough to her training to believe in it and junior enough that believing in it is expensive. (The older term **NQT** – Newly Qualified Teacher, one year – is what everyone over forty in the staffroom still says.)

Technician. A non-teaching specialist who maintains a practical department: equipment, materials, machine servicing, consumables, safety records, and an encyclopaedic institutional memory. Science, D&T and art all have them where budgets allow,

and fewer of them every year where they don't. †**Baz** is the reason the workshop functions.

Cover. Standing in for an absent colleague. A **cover supervisor** is employed to supervise rather than teach; a **supply teacher** is a qualified teacher brought in temporarily through an agency. The †**cover technician** in Episode Two is doing a competent job with somebody else's paperwork and out-of-date printout, which is exactly how the damage happens.

Teaching assistant (TA). Support staff working with individual pupils or classes, often those with identified additional needs.

SENCo. Special Educational Needs Coordinator: the teacher responsible for provision for pupils with **SEND** (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities). An **EHCP** (Education, Health and Care Plan) is the statutory document that secures funded support for a child with substantial needs. Violet has no plan, no diagnosis, and no file, because nobody has looked. This is extremely common and is not a plot device.

Safeguarding. The whole statutory apparatus for protecting children in school, overseen by a **Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL)**. Every adult in an English school has training in it and a duty under it.

Pupil premium. Additional per-pupil funding for children from lower-income households, tied to eligibility for **free school meals (FSM)**.

MIS. The school's Management Information System; the database holding every pupil's record: attendance, grades, behaviour points, contact details, and names. Registers, seating plans and printed class lists are all generated from it. Its handling of a pupil's **legal name** versus their **preferred name** is a configuration setting,

applied inconsistently, that determines whether a child gets through Wednesday morning intact. The novel does not editorialise about this. It just shows you a printout.

Sir / Miss. How English schoolchildren address teachers, regardless of the teacher's actual name, and (in the case of 'Miss') regardless of marital status, seniority or preference. Being called "Miss" all day by three hundred children is one of the small strangenesses of the job.

Detention. Being kept behind after school, or through break or lunch, as a sanction.

6. Design and Technology

Design and Technology (D&T). A National Curriculum subject in England combining designing and making across materials: resistant materials (wood, metal, plastics), textiles, electronics and systems, graphics, and food. It descends from the older crafts (woodwork, metalwork, needlework, domestic science) but is not them; the reform that created D&T in 1990 deliberately put *designing* at its centre, and the argument about whether that was the right call has been running ever since. It is the argument between Ms Tan and Mr Harris. It has never been settled and possibly should not be.

Note the ampersand. **D&T**, *not* DT. Ms Tan cares about this.

Design and Technology Association. The subject association: professional body, advocate, and for two decades now the subject's most persistent defender in policy conversations.

Workshop. The room. Benches, vices, machine tools, extraction, a store cupboard, and a particular smell (MDF dust, machine oil, hot

glue, other people's lunch) that anyone who was taught in one can summon instantly thirty years later.

Bench. A workbench, and by extension a pupil's place in the room. "Third bench back, nearest the window" is an address.

Pillar drill. A floor- or bench-mounted drill press. Loud, unforgiving, requires goggles and a signature, and is the first genuinely dangerous machine most English children are trusted with.

MDF. Medium-density fibreboard. Cheap, flat, stable, endlessly available in schools, and dusty enough to require proper extraction. The material substrate of an entire generation's education.

Acrylic. Perspex; a rigid transparent plastic, laser-cut or line-bent. Cracks if you treat it like wood, as †Denzel discovered.

Craft knife sign-out. Sharp tools are individually numbered, signed out to a named pupil, and signed back in before anyone leaves. A universal workshop protocol and a mundane piece of safety administration; which is exactly why the list is read aloud from, and exactly why Episode Two happens the way it does.

The keyring. Shorthand, throughout this book and throughout the profession, for the small, quick, guaranteed-outcome project every pupil takes home at the end of a short rotation: an acrylic keyring, a phone stand, a small box. Defensible, popular with parents, visible in the display cabinet, easy to mark, and (the charge Ms Tan would level) capable of being made without a single design decision having been taken by the child holding it.

Rotation / carousel. The Key Stage 3 arrangement in which classes cycle through several material areas across a year (six weeks of

textiles, six of ‘resistant materials’¹, six of food) so that limited specialist rooms serve the whole cohort. Efficient. Also, the reason a unit of work often has to be short, self-contained, and to end in something you can carry. One of the main criticisms of this approach to curriculum management is that it is difficult to ensure progression across the years and key stage.

Scheme of work / scheme of learning. The department’s written plan for a unit: sequence, content, outcomes, assessment. Signed off by the head of department. The gap between the title on the scheme of work and what is actually happening in the room is where Episode Four lives.

Design brief. The statement of the problem to be solved and for whom. **Contextual challenge** is the current formulation: pupils are given a context, and must identify their own problem within it, rather than being handed the problem ready-made.

Persona. A specific fictional user with a name, a life and an actual daily difficulty, written to make designing-for-someone-else concrete rather than abstract. †Deb Hargreaves is a persona. She is also, by about Episode Five, a person.

Design fiction. Using a speculative but plausible near-future scenario as the setting for a design task: not spectacle, but the ordinary future: what has changed, what hasn’t, what people have quietly stopped calling things. A real and researched pedagogical approach, and the vehicle for †*New Greencutting, 2050*.

¹ Do **not** get me started!

Ideation. Generating ideas fast, in quantity, without commitment; the discipline of producing six bad ideas before permitting yourself a good one.

Iteration. The process of realising a prototype, iterating it, testing it, finding out how it fails, and making the next one. The whole unit in one word.

Mock-up / model. Rough, provisional versions made to think with rather than to keep. In D&T the mock-up is not a rehearsal for the work; it *is* the work.

Prototype. The final ‘artefact’ at the end of an iterative design project. The term ‘product’ (which implies a finalised, manufactured and marketable object) was replaced by ‘prototype’ in the 2017 GCSE reform as a corrective.

Crit (critique) / review. A structured session in which work is set out and questioned by peers. Borrowed from art school and design studio practice. Episode Eight is one.

Demonstration. A teacher performing a process in front of the class while narrating the decisions inside it, so that tacit knowledge (the feel of a sharp tool, the point at which you commit to a cut) transfers by watching rather than by telling. Argued in the research literature to be one of D&T’s **signature pedagogies**: the distinctive teaching move that defines how the subject is taught, as the case method defines law or the ward round defines medicine. Ms Tan’s whole practice rests on it. Which is why the lesson in which she skips it is the loudest thing in the book.

Mainly designing / mainly making. A distinction between kinds of D&T task: some units are principally about acquiring and exercising making skills toward a defined outcome; others are principally about designerly thinking: generating, rejecting, defending, refining

ideas. Both are legitimate. Most departments default heavily to the first-named because it produces a markable object by Friday. Ms Tan's unit is *mainly designing*, and the trouble she is in is directly proportional to that fact.

Isometric / orthographic. Two conventions of technical drawing. Isometric shows an object in three dimensions from one corner; orthographic shows it truthfully from several separate views (front, side, plan) none of which alone tells you what the thing looks like.

7. Greencutting itself

†**Greencutting.** A small post-industrial borough in the Midlands — the belt of central England, historically the country's manufacturing heart, comprising the West Midlands around Birmingham and the East Midlands around Nottingham, Leicester and Derby. Not on any map.

Borough. A town or district with its own local council.

Edge tools. Cutting tools with a sharpened edge: shears, billhooks, chisels, plane blades. Made in the Midlands and the North for centuries; almost entirely gone as an industry. †Hollis & Marsh made them.

Drop forge. A hammer that shapes hot metal by falling on it. Loud enough to be heard across a town, and remembered by people who never worked one.

'On the tools.' In the trade; doing skilled manual work. Said with pride.

Estate (as in the †Marsh Fields estate). A large planned residential development, frequently council-built social housing. The American near-equivalent is 'the projects,' though the connotations

do not map cleanly and English estates are far more various than the word suggests.

Retail park. An out-of-town cluster of large chain stores with a car park. Very often built on the site of something that used to make things.

Nan. Grandmother.

‘Half nine.’ Half past nine. Never half to.

‘The number 47.’ A bus, identified by route number. Public transport in a post-industrial town is how thirteen-year-olds get anywhere at all.

Nothing in this glossary is needed to follow the story. Violet doesn't explain any of it either, and she's the one who has to live in it.

Further Reading (Not for the Faint of Heart)

Notes on the Preface

A companion to the preface, kept separate so the preface itself can read as a novel's opening rather than a bibliography. For readers, researchers, or reviewers who want to check the claims behind the **Continuity Announcement** (aka the Preface).

On Design and Technology's decline

Education Policy Institute research, reported in TES, "*GCSEs: Design and technology take-up halves in a decade*" (23 March 2022): the source for the "44% to 22% of the cohort, 2009–2020" figure. [tes.com/magazine/news/general/gcse-design-and-technology-take-halves-decade](https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/gcse-design-and-technology-take-halves-decade)

Ofqual provisional entry data, reported in Schools Week, on the 2019 fall in D&T and engineering entries as EBacc subjects rose. schoolsweek.co.uk/gcse-entries-engineering-and-design-technology-flop-as-ebacc-subjects-soar

Amanda Spielman (Ofsted's then Chief Inspector) pushing back on attributing the decline solely to the EBacc, reported in Schools Week: the "*red herring*" line referenced in the preface. schoolsweek.co.uk/spielman-red-herring-to-blame-plunge-in-dt-numbers-solely-on-ebacc

Lord Baker, Lord Blunkett, Baroness Morris, and former Ofsted chief inspectors **Sir Michael Wilshaw** and **Sir Mike Tomlinson**, open letter to the then Education Secretary, reported in The Telegraph (19 August 2019); cross-party, cross-generation criticism

of the EBacc's effect on D&T, drama, music, and dance entries since 2010.

Sir James Dyson, quoted in The Telegraph (29 August 2022) on the “*shameful*” decline in D&T entries and its roots in the EBacc's introduction.

Background on the subject's pre-2010 trajectory: The Conversation, “*Why has the number of teenagers taking design and technology GCSE dropped?*” Useful for the point that decline predates the EBacc, even if it accelerated after.

On the “*knowledge-rich*” curriculum and E.D. Hirsch's influence

E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1987): the original source of ‘core knowledge’ as an idea, decades before it reached English policy.

Reporting and academic commentary on **Michael Gove** and **Nick Gibb's** stated debt to Hirsch, including Gove's 2013 Social Market Foundation speech (“*vapid happy talk,*” a “*common stock of knowledge*”); covered contemporaneously and revisited in academic work on the “*genealogy of cultural literacy*” in English curriculum policy (Taylor & Francis, *Changing English*, 2022).

Cultural Learning Alliance, “*What is a knowledge-rich curriculum?*” A clear, current overview of the Hirsch-influenced approach and how it's since been questioned by the DfE's own 2025 Curriculum and Assessment Review.

culturallearningalliance.org.uk/knowledge-rich-curriculum

On Michael Gove's reception among the teaching profession

BBC coverage of Gove's 2013 departure from the Department for Education, including reaction from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers and Lord Baker: the source for the "*Blob*" material and the profession's mixed-to-hostile response.

[feeds.bbc.co.uk/news/education-28311032](https://www.bbc.com/news/education-28311032)

BBC coverage of Gove being heckled at the 2013 NAHT conference.

[feeds.bbc.co.uk/news/education-22558756](https://www.bbc.com/news/education-22558756)

TES, "*Michael Gove: Top quotes:*" a representative sample of his own rhetoric, including "*the enemies of promise*" line, presented in his own words rather than paraphrase.

On D&T pedagogy specifically

Dr Alison Hardy (ed.), *Learning to Teach Design and Technology in the Secondary School*, 4th edn (Routledge, 2020): the book's own fictional set text for Ms Tan's SCITT year, and a genuine, current teacher-training text. If you are a parent or someone else interested in finding out what D&T is and where it came from, Alison has written a historical piece for the Edge Foundation, available at edge.co.uk/research/learning-from-the-past/ (look for Thematic Report).

Dr Matt McLain's published work on the demonstration as a signature pedagogy for D&T, and on design fiction as a pedagogical vehicle for "*mainly designing*" units; the real scholarship underpinning both Ms Tan's training and the "*New Greencutting, 2050*" brief itself. If you really want to, you can read his research at profiles.ljmu.ac.uk/2543-matt-mclain (his university profile).

None of this needs to have been read to enjoy the novel. It's here for the reader who finishes it and wants to know how much of Mr Harris's world is real. Nearly all of it.



Who is OK Kitsune?



OK Kitsune is the fiction pseudonym for me, Dr Matt McLain (Haha!!), ex-D&T teacher, teacher educator and researcher at Liverpool John Moores University (aka LJMU). By day I am an academic and serious scholar of D&T education, curriculum and pedagogy, by night...

The name came from my first visit to Japan (日本), in 2024, where I fell in love with Japanese culture and the Shinto Kami (local spirits). Kitsune (狐) are Japanese foxes, shapeshifting spirits (妖怪; *yōkai*) reputed to be the servants of the god Inari (稲荷), deity of industry, agriculture, general prosperity and worldly success, as well as foxes, fertility, rice, tea, and sake (quite relevant to a D&T educator!).

The kitsune were known to be mischievous tricksters, but neither good nor bad: mercurial, faithful, and playful servants of their master. So, an appropriate pseudonym for me, I think.

The Ms Tan Tales: series description

A post-industrial Midlands academy. A D&T teacher trying something unproven. A thirteen-year-old at the back bench who notices everything. One term, told one Wednesday at a time.

Coming Up In The Next Episode...

The Ms Tan Tales, Book One

There was no keyring. There was, instead, a persona card, a fictional town in 2050, and a woman called Deb Hargreaves with nowhere safe to keep the one thing that mattered to her.

What Sort of Book is it?

A note on genre: Call it 'speculative pedagogy fiction:' a novel that takes a teaching idea seriously enough to run it: in a real room, with thirty 'real' thirteen-year-olds, and no guarantee it works. Part school story, part workplace novel, part quiet argument about what a subject is for. As far as anyone can tell, it is also the first novel set in a D&T classroom. Oh, and there's a glossary at the end for those unfamiliar with the education system in England!