



The Writer as Outsider

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MY OUTSIDERDOM STARTED early on, in primary. I got bullied by a gang of boys and a few shouty girls. The quiet ones, like me, didn't fit in. During morning break the older boys chased me and my best friend up the steps to the school's disused back entrance and stood guard over us, their arms angled up against the door as we cowered beneath, waiting for the bell. I was held prisoner because I was smart and wore glasses, and because my father was a teacher. Teachers' kids needed taught a lesson: they did not belong. If you raised your hand too often in class, you were branded a show-off, a cheat.

A couple of years on, I developed anorexia. I was only ten or eleven, the first anorexic in the village. I'd already been almost blinded by a snowball containing pebbles, thrown as if by accident. My hated glasses probably saved my vision. Mostly, though, the bullying had turned verbal. Jokes and jibes from the boys in the desks behind me: they called me 'skeleton'. Which only made me more determined to succeed. Which annoyed them even more.

Because of my anorexia, my parents didn't deem me strong enough to attend the regional lycée, as this would have meant my getting up at six every morning to catch the train. Instead they sent me to the local secondary. Here the bullying continued, but more subtly. Before lessons, the smoking, gum-spitting boys hung around the top of the steps of the underground bicycle lock-up. They casually flicked cigarette ash, stood shoulder to shoulder, forcing me to go back down and exit via the garage



door, the long way round. In the gym I was always picked last for team games, after the evangelist's daughter and a girl in braids who walked to school barefoot, dishevelled and still eating breakfast, her wagon-wheel slice of bread dripping red jam. These two ended up as my mates in the fortnightly cookery class. The teacher's cleaning regime was strict. Each group of three girls was responsible for their own cooking station, with a rota: doing the dishes, polishing the chrome surfaces, brushing and mopping the floor. So easy to interfere when the teacher wasn't looking. Liquids got spilled on my carefully buffed work top, dirt tracked over my still-wet floor. I came to dread those lessons, dread the smirks, the hissed comments as I was made to rewipe the cooker, fetch back the mop and bucket. My tormentors were second-generation immigrants — Italian, German and Tibetan. They regarded me as fair game, their personal hate figure: the quintessential Swiss, a teacher's kid. How ironic — some ten years later I found out my paternal grandmother had been illegitimate, and half- Italian! At the time all I could do to fight back was excel. Thankfully my health improved and I finally escaped to the lycée, then to university.

Being bullied taught me a valuable lesson: I became self-reliant, learned to look inside for sustenance. It made me, I hope, more compassionate, more sensitive to other people, other creatures, other worlds; made me an outsider by choice. Small wonder, then, that much of my writing focuses on social misfits; focuses on different realities, the real, the surreal, the supernatural; focuses on the criminal. Focuses, quite simply, on the other.