
MAYDAY! MAYDAY! Testing to Destruction

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It was a beautiful day in May but Leo wasn't enjoying it at all. He was revising for his GCSEs. He'd been working his way systematically through his revision timetable and now he was concentrating on RE, which was to be his first exam. He was bored, really bored. When this was over he and his friends were planning a huge bonfire. All this rubbish piled about his room would be gone. He threw the RE stuff aside. It wasn't a key subject for him. He ought to be doing chemistry. He needed to get a B or he wouldn't be able to take it at A level. He'd better start with elements, compounds and mixtures. He had to get his head round solutions, fractional distillation, crystallisation, filtration, chromatography and that was just the start. There was the periodic table, acids and alkalis, then there was physics and biology and, and, and, and. He was overcome by a feeling of despair. This was definitely, absolutely definitely, not how life should be. He had to get out of here.

'Just taking a break', he called to his mother on his way out. He'd texted Josh to meet him at the bus shelter and after a moment's thought sent this message on to Jamie, Dan, Holly and Grace.

Three weeks later the teachers in their school, waiting with the sealed envelopes containing the exam papers, were looking anxious. It was nine o'clock in the morning and GCSE maths was due to start, but all the desks in the examination room were empty. Not one pupil had arrived. The head teacher had been summoned and was looking thunderous.

'Where are they?', he said. 'Where the hell are they?'

'We're not the only school', said Rob Dawkins, who was looking at his mobile. 'There's no one at St Thomas's or King Ted's or Middlethorpe.'

'Or Kiddlstones or St Edwins', said Marie, waving hers.

'My brother says the kids haven't turned up at his school in Dorset', said Peter.

The envelopes remained sealed. Teachers asked siblings if they knew where their brothers and sisters were and heard that they had all left for school as usual that morning. By lunchtime this was headline news. All over the country only a tiny handful of GCSE candidates had gone into school.

Almost all the Year Elevens who had been hiding themselves away came back to school at lunchtime, whether they were taking the geography exam that afternoon or not. They said that they were the most tested generation ever and they were sick of it. They said they hadn't been skiving. They'd been revising for other exams (well, mostly). They expected that they'd have to take the exam later. Maths was a core subject after all. That's why they'd chosen it. They just wanted to make a point and they had.

Except for rapidly sorting out the afternoon's exam, at first the schools didn't know how to react. Some sent the pupils not taking geography home. Some gathered them together to be reprimanded, or to talk through what had happened in the spirit of enquiry, depending on the general ethos of the school. Most tried to find a ring leader but this proved to be a fruitless task. All took comfort from the fact that it was happening in every school. The pupils were generally calm, although they felt the current of power flowing within and between them. As long as they stuck together they knew they were safe. They couldn't expel a whole school year across the whole country.

They were right. And it was impossible to have a whole year group without a maths GCSE. So many things were conditional on that result. There was a lot of anger, chaos and confusion in the adult world. Some were convinced that left-wing teachers were behind it. Some teachers wished they had been. Some suspected Russell Brand or various teenage icons. But there was no evidence to be found. Some said that they had always known that kids were being pushed too far. Others said this was a spoiled and immature generation. The story made the headlines all around the world. There were rumours that 11-year-olds were planning to refuse to take the tests for their Year Six SATs [Standard Assessment Tasks]. The gesture couldn't be ignored. Something would have to be done

A week later, as politicians argued, educationalists reflected and reviewed, exam boards explored their options and newspapers moved on to the next big story, Leo, Josh, Jamie, Holly and Grace got together again.

'Do you think they'll find out it was us?', said Josh.

'They won't know if we don't tell them', said Leo. 'There's no trail to track. It was a brilliant idea of yours Holly just to talk to people. There's nothing online for them to find'.

'I didn't really believe that stuff about six degrees of separation when my Mum told me about it', said Holly. 'Fancy finding every single Year Eleven just by passing it on'.

'I wonder what those saddoes who turned up feel like now?', said Jamie.

'If we tell, we'll be famous', said Grace.

'If we tell, we'll be expelled', said Josh.

‘Of course we’re not going to tell’, said Leo. ‘What we’ve got to do is to decide what we’re going to do next.’

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