

‘I’ll tak the bus doon’, said Seana. Eileen, she thought, had the potential to be a new pal.

‘Say that again! – Whit did yi say?’ Eileen in her skin-tight jeans was incredulous.

‘I’ll tak...I’ll *take* the bus... doon,’ repeated Seana, trying to acknowledge the joke and mask her discomfort at being ridiculed. Eileen laughed, ‘that’s just so funny. The way you speak. I’ve never heard anything like that before. Say it again...’

Eileen had been to Majorca on holiday with her parents and spoke Joppa.

Seana’s first term at the art college, walking everywhere because she didn’t know how the busses worked and feeling a door key in her pocket for the first time. At home you needed nothing in your pockets, not even money.

It was Friday afternoon in the old red Lauriston Place building and the students were dismally sticking fragments of broken stained glass onto a window pane with Plasticine. It seemed to them that they were studiously ignored by the tutors and the superior older students. The Head of Department, they had been pompously assured in the induction lecture, was world famous, so by osmosis perhaps his greatness would feed into them. That appeared to be the unspoken ethos of the place.

Seana never realised she had an accent till then. At home, the island accent could sound oafish and she eschewed it just a little. After Miss Fraser’s class in the Primary school they all learnt you shouldn’t say ‘ken’

Miss Fraser had been unequivocal, dialect was *not* to be used inside the school. The thick ones forgot and carried on saying, ‘I dunna ken’ only to be repeatedly corrected.

‘We don’t say ‘ken’ in school, we speak properly, don’t we? What do we say?’

‘What do we say Seana?’ Miss Fraser’s eyes drilled.

'I don't know' is the proper way Miss,' her correct response cementing her apart from the linguistically impoverished others.

Seana's mother pooh-poohed the country accent dispelling it as common. She had relatives in Nairn and explained the virtues of the Nairn tongue. 'The people of Nairn are the best spoken...' as if there had been an official edict. Nairn had the best weather too apparently.

There were only certain things you could say in the treacle-type island voice. You would certainly never read the news in it or make a speech in parliament. Seana could speak it, but that voice was strictly limited by place. She tempered it when she spoke to her mother. She noticed her father used it when he spoke to the fishermen and the country people. You could tell the kind of person he was talking to on the phone by the intonation he used. But when he was arguing a point, he too diluted it. You would never dare talk like that in school.

*Why was it always about how you spoke and not what you said,* she asked herself.

Since those times long ago with Miss Fraser, she thought she had it worked out, and could flip subtly from playground to home to school-speak. She was an adept chameleon of intonation and inflection whether it be Sing-song or assertion. She could adapt her speech to her audience and knew the prosody and rhythms that mattered to different ears. She could feel assimilated or distanced as the situation required.

Eileen's outburst unnerved her. She hadn't come all this way down south to the city to be laughed at. A country girl in the city. One of Edna O'Brien's hapless Galway Noras. *I'm not going to be caught out twice. I'm not a 'girl with green eyes'*, and she carefully bound up and stored away the narrow blade of anger she felt for Eileen.

However, it was still the case that in Edinburgh, people thought her accent quaint. They exclaimed and pulled around an audience to make her speak, so that others could marvel at the linguistic oddity. They weren't interested in what she had to say, and that's what ended her island voice. How she spoke, Seana decided, would have to be sorted as a matter of urgency.

In a month she was talking Muirhouse. 'Ah'm gonnae go wye the bus. See yis there.' 'Chum us ti th stop then.' It cemented her with the people she wanted to belong with. The choice was between that, or the plummy tones of some-one called Melissa who hadn't done exams and went to the Steiner school. When Melissa spoke out in a tutorial it was with a boomy authority. She always sounded clever, astute and without question, *right*.

'And what does *your* father do for a living?' Melissa with her sleek black hair and powerful features, smoked a cigarette in the drawing break with the ample gestures of a Gatsby. She had no idea the question might come as an embarrassment to some. Thrown together in their first year drawing class, Melissa already had demonstrated scary dexterity with a Rotring Pen, arranging her materials confidently on top of her desk on the first day, 'I'm going to become a *Theata* designer' she proclaimed, and no-one doubted it. Apartheid of accent.

Then there was Cammy.