

The Titans

by Alex Burrett

(Fiction for grown-ups)

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Dedicated to Morgan, Mitchell, Gorse, Scarlett and Lauren.

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Index

[The beginning](#)

[Big Joe](#)

[Richard](#)

[Me](#)

[The Titans](#)

[Eddy](#)

[The barn dance](#)

[Christmas holiday](#)

[Mr Bourg's fish](#)

[The building site](#)

[Rope swing](#)

[The in-between years](#)

[Street Comprehensive](#)

[Conversation with Joe](#)

[Advice from Richard](#)

[My thoughts](#)

[A dream](#)

[The tyrant](#)

[Not the end](#)

[Author's scrawl](#)

[Epilogue](#)

THE BEGINNING

"Edward has recently arrived in the village. He will be sitting at your table. I want you to make him welcome – let him join in your games."

Those were the words, well almost the words, Miss Arks used to accompany Eddy as she thrust him into my life. They were his accompaniment. Miss Arks was the only person I have ever heard call him Edward. Even his parents called him Eddy.

I was eight then – the oldest at the table. I know I was the oldest there because the subject arose every October – the month of my birthday. Big Joe and Richard had their birthdays after January.

The three of us had been together for over three years – since the first day of infants. By the time Eddy appeared we were all juniors. More importantly, by the time Eddy arrived, we were all Titans.

I remember exactly what he looked like that day. He had short and spiky hair – like kids that lived in cities. He had round cheeks with freckles and sticky-out ears. His eyes. His eyes were green, deep green like a row of beech trees in mid-spring. But he was not a Titan. And as much as we respected Miss Arks and her intentions, being told to let Eddy join in with us and actually letting him were two very different concepts.

Big Joe, Richard and I had spent the summer holiday, the one between being third year infants and first year juniors, discussing. It may be hard to picture three seven year-olds spending their summer holiday discussing – but discuss is what we did. Well, we spent a lot of the available time talking. Whenever we were together, we debated.

If you are sceptical, we were sufficiently well motivated and we had enough time in conference during that period to reach conclusions. It was our aim to find answers. And because they were what we wanted, we developed our own way of getting to them. To find answers we 'fact sorted'. 'Fact sorting' involved using what we had been taught to discover what we had not. It demanded a state of mind that questioned everything – even the facts it was based on. Fortunately, most of the facts we used were reliable – the basic building blocks of understanding. The answers we sought towered above. Real whys, hard answers – work!

At school we were taught to ask questions – not how to solve problems for ourselves. School taught us that every answer could be found somewhere – written in a book or stored in a teacher's mind. At the age of seven I knew such a claim was ridiculous.

Our lessons were based on the three 'r's – reading, writing and arithmetic. There was also time to 'p' – play but no time for real 'l' – learning. Educators are concerned with the standard of children's grammar – their ability to follow rules. They make sure the next generation can multiply and assume parents will teach them obedience. Unfortunately most parents fail to educate their children about the real world. And generally teachers do not teach us how to deal with society either. At school we are taught how to use money and check the change – we are not told what to do if we find a ten pound note in Woolworths. We are expected to wash our hands before dinner – we are not given guidance about what to do with them between meals. There are always exceptions. Miss Arks was an exception – but this is not her story, it is mine.

To create the Titans, we started with one fact – a simple fact. Three sevens are twenty-one.

Times-tables were one of the most important elements of our education during the infant years – and they were usually mastered by the end of them. I say usually because there are always exceptions. Our trio had an exception in this case. I will let you discover which one of us was the slowest. You may already be able to guess correctly who that was – and all you know so far is names. (Mine is Axel by the way.)

Please, please do not think that the names I use are clichés. Names often adapt to fit character's personalities. Some may argue that an amount of a person's nature is derived from their name – an unusual name can cause a child to be alienated by peers. Often names just seem to suit characters perfectly. Occasionally names are so powerful that they influence language itself. The Marquis de Sade, the pillaging Vandals and General Molotov (with his fiery little cocktail), have all added wonderful colour to our language.

Personally I hate clichés. I apologise now if too many materialise as I tell my story. I hope they do not. It will disappoint me if they do. There were three of us. We were each seven years old. Therefore, we had (between us) enough experience to make a twenty-one year-old person – a man. We decided that if we shared our knowledge and ideas we could each have the outlook of a twenty-one year-old. Collectively we could come of age.

The desire to be 'grown-up' is not at all unusual. What made us different to other kids was we had discovered how to change want into reality. We were alchemists of desire. We found a way to achieve premature manhood. We made ourselves men.

[<Index>](#)

BIG JOE

He was big. Is that a bad way to start? Does size mean anything?

No and yes. Big can mean a lot of things. Size is important. Let me explain.

The average seven or eight year-old perceives a lot more big things than the average forty year-old. To me then, towns were big. Now I know it is cities that are big. To Eddy, when he arrived at Hill Village, the bump that the school rested half way up probably seemed big. I knew bigger hills, ones with roads so steep you had to push your bike up them. Compared to the school's little mountain, Big Joe was small. Compared to all the other first year juniors, Big Joe was big.

When he was a first year infant he was the tallest of all the infants – first, second and third years. We had a height chart on the wall in the assembly room and that fact stood there for all to see. A line above all others (juniors were above drawing lines) had Joe written next to it. For three years his name was placed at the top of the chart. This dimension of Joe's earned him some respect. Physical size always does that.

As I am trying to describe him to you, I must add another dimension. Build. I will add shape to your image of Big Joe. He was strong. That is as much as I can really remember.

It always surprises me how witnesses help police produce photo-fits or artist's impressions of perpetrators months after crimes have been committed. Perhaps all criminals look the same and it is only their skin colours and amount of hair that distinguishes one from another. Or perhaps we notice a person's features more vividly when we have met them during stressful circumstances. Perhaps stress turns the brain into a camera. That may be true because I can still see Eddy's face quite clearly when I close my eyes and review my past. Sometimes I see it at other times too.

Personally I tend to remember notions rather than details. This form of memory can also be useful. Big Joe was strong. He may not have been able to pull a train with his teeth but, as far as I was concerned then, he was strong.

His father was a farmer. Big Joe was his son and heir. Starting from the day he learnt, or rather was trained, how to walk, big Joe embarked upon a transformation. He changed from being his Dad's son to his employee. At the age of seven he was about eighty percent of the way there. Older onlookers may have disagreed with my fraction. That is because adults love to look down at children, pour scorn on their perceptions, belittle them.

Big Joe's father was a prime example of that adult attitude. He hardly appreciated his son's efforts. After all, a seven year-old is not the most effective piece of farm equipment. Big Joe saw things from a different perspective. As far as he was concerned, a large part of his life's energy was dedicated to farmwork. So, unappreciated help given to a busy parent was the arduous labour that shaped a son – no story there!

To a Titan, education was a springboard – a device that the recipient could use to leap forward into discovery: Darwin's Beagle, Newton's apple, an acid tab. The Titans used knowledge and the Titans was our means to escape from the narrow-minded thinking that imprisoned us.

To most of the teachers at Hill, education was something that turned the ignorant into the hopeful. They wanted to give us the opportunity to succeed. They

saw each piece of knowledge they gave us as a brick. When we collected enough of these bricks we would be able to build our own future home. If we collected extra bricks we could build extensions, swimming pools, conservatories.

I think education is the process of being shown how to explain what we already know. It is about being taught how to utilise the theories that academics have decided to use to describe every phenomena. The more we learn, the less individual we become.

Learning is about falling in with accepted theories, compromising. The wise compromise, agree, unify. The uneducated stand out, do things their own ways, are imprisoned. If knowledge is the key to the world, it opens only one door. It lets you into an orderly metropolis, one of reason and logic. If you fail to cross the threshold you are an outcast, unwanted and undesirable – an outsider.

People who strive to discover truths try to find answers to their own questions. To do so they create ways of answering and therefore create their own solutions. Big Joe had his solutions. In an attempt to become a more efficient machine, and therefore be rewarded with some affection from his father, he developed both physically and mentally. His body built muscle and stronger bones as it reacted to demands placed on it. His mind formulated the theory that the quickest route between two points is a direct line.

Roman road builders had displayed knowledge of this fact over two thousand years before Big Joe recreated it – proving we are capable of far more than what we are taught. But even the mighty legions displayed only an interpretation of this mathematical truth. They respected the great god Topography. Big Joe didn't. His interpretation of this principle dictated going through things.

If he had to be on the other side of an area of boggy ground, he'd walk through it rather than go around it. If he had to collect the eggs from the chickens in the morning, as he often did, it was quicker for him to walk through the clucking hens than try to avoid them. Consequently, if he had to cross the playground, he would not bother to try and weave his way through other playground users. Within a few months of arriving at Hill School, Big Joe's locomotion reputation preceded him. The majority of children chose to move out of the way of his reputation rather than wait for the physical realisation of the Big Joe moving myth.

Before I continue, I want you to know that Big Joe was not nasty, not even bad. Titans abhorred cruelty. There was no evil in any of the Titans in the beginning – in the days before Eddy arrived. Big Joe was simply a realist. The genocide of his father's stock did not bother him. At certain times he was called on to get involved. He was expected to help out when the chickens were being killed. His job was to take a just-throat-cut chicken from his Grandfather's experienced left hand (that trusty, sharp pocket knife being in his right) and shake it.

We have all heard stories about chickens being able to run after their heads have been cut off. Well, if you are holding them by their legs, they cannot. Trapped by a firm grip around the lower limbs, the upper ones move instead. For a seven year-old arm, even Big Joe's, this flapping can cause quite a remarkable effect. A few consecutive powerful beats can change a limp-necked chicken into an elaborate fairground helium-filled balloon. A firm grip of the legs is necessary to stop a mortified creature from escaping for a final frolic in the yard.

For Big Joe, the captor, this struggle would become a competition between a dead bird trying to fly and him trying to shake the blood out of its flustering body. The blood must be drained to make the flesh palatable. This is done by swinging the chicken in vertical circles from an extended arm. Following Newton's third law of motion (the one about equal and opposite reaction) the blood flies out of the chicken's severed neck.

Big Joe always rose to the fight and he would see success in streaks of blood appearing on the tarnished wall in front of him. A splatter with every revolution – each bloody revolution.

You know a little bit about Big Joe now. He was big, strong and capable – but not cruel. He was, by the way, the one who struggled for a long time with his times tables. He was not stupid, no-one is. His brain had other concerns – practical problems. For him, lists of numbers were just too far removed from reality to be worthy of worry.

[<Index>](#)

RICHARD

The village was not very large. I could say it was small – but that would sound wrong – give the wrong impression. Hill village was all about not being big. It had one church and one war memorial. It had a village hall with en suite swings and a tennis court. It did have two shops – but one of them was also the only garage and petrol station. The other shop, the one where sweets were sold in white conical paper bags, is closed now. Its floor, where small fidgety feet once gathered, has been carpeted. At half three this afternoon the front room of Bell Cottage will be empty. Two armchairs and a sofa have replaced the jumble of thoughtful faces which used to flood in at that time. This more distinguished room has to wait until later now to be filled with noise. At six pm the current owners go in and switch on the television.

Because the village was not big, people knew a lot about each other. This fact is particularly important in my story. I knew Richard. I knew his family. I knew what made him – David. David made Richard. The bad news for all DNA devotees is David was not Richard's father – he was his brother. David was five years older than Richard and a committed bully. Unlike adult bullies who justify their violence with a lust for power and money, David attacked Richard without reason. Other observers might have interpreted the situation differently – the Titans did not!

Under this continual oppression Richard developed marvellous talents. He formed an ability to see into the future. This talent arose from the necessity to know when David was going to launch an attack. If David came into a room intent on aggression, Richard would know when it was going to occur, from what direction David would assault and what weapons he would draw. Good boxers develop the same skill. They anticipate the next punch by watching their opponents fidgeting and reading the look in their eyes. Richard might not have been a hard puncher, but he showed an understanding of his enemy that Montgomery and Rommel would have envied.

The Titans were not interested in fighting – but Richard's prophetic awareness was a useful attribute. He could operate as a lookout without having to go to the trouble of looking. He could sense oncoming danger before the personification of it arrived on the scene. And if we did get caught out, he could instantly find the perfect hiding place – that ability never failed.

Richard was slightly built. The David-inspired nervousness that he suffered meant that every bit of food he ate was converted into twitches, side steps and sudden leaps. He was useless at heavy work – but he could move! He could move cleverly. And like the Grand Masters of martial arts in China, he had discovered how to use an attacker's strength against himself. On the occasions when David did grab him, Richard would move quickly in another direction and cause his elder brother to plunge to the floor or collide with a wall. And his getaway speed was unrivalled. For three years in a row he was the fastest in our year at the school sports day – the best sprinter. I had three green second place rosettes to be proud of. Eddy changed that order. I have no idea what made Eddy so fast.

Richard had one more useful characteristic. He possessed a huge amount of factual information. When he and his brother were not fighting they must have talked. Richard was privileged with the wonderful opportunity of being able to access the knowledge of a Second Year at Street Comprehensive.

The divide between the caste of Hill School pupils and the tribe from Street Comprehensive was immense. There was more between us than age. Going to the 'Comp' was both feared and desired – a not too uncommon pairing of emotions. Even though Street Comprehensive was only eight miles away, it was going to take the Titans four years to get there. Four long years. Fantastic tales about Comp life percolated their way to our remote village school. When they arrived they were horrific: First Years get their heads flushed down toilets; a peculiar punishment called detention is dealt out for talking in class; after every school disco there are mass fights.

Richard got the truth first hand. More importantly, via David, he learnt physics, chemistry, biology, personal relationships, how to play rugby and about wars (history). To make you realise the importance to the Titans of having such knowledge available, I must liken it to that of Robert Scott's South Pole expedition being given skidoos, satellite navigation equipment, Gortex clothing and Royal Marines' arctic rations. Useful.

Although the Titans were interested in more than acquiring knowledge, the factual information Richard supplied was always used. We wanted to create our own society. We aimed to set ourselves apart from all the despair and destruction that was going on in the news. We wanted to avoid making the mistakes our parents were making. To achieve this we took the knowledge that was available and used it to help construct our own philosophies. Richard helped, Richard was a gatherer. He provided the technical information we needed, suggested possible outcomes of our actions and, because he knew so much, stood as legal adviser to our team.

The Titans sorted the information he offered. If we had blindly accepted it, we would have made the same mistakes as the shortsighted adults around us. But we had vision – so we considered its relevance to our beliefs and then decided to what extent we would include it in our credo. We were not slaves to flawed collected wisdom, I made sure of that. I understood then, as now, the advantage of being aware of different ways of thinking without necessarily adopting them.

I have described Richard – not physically imposing but nimble and knowledgeable. His ability to predict helped us – as it would help any organisation. His supply of accurate information backed up the Titans in the same way that good civil servants support a government.

[<Index>](#)

ME

Every group has its leader. Anarchy will never work. Leaders always evolve.

The leader. Some people have given holders of this vital position a bad name. But a great many leaders have been good – Gandhi, J.F.K., Julius Caesar. There have been evil ones too. This can be explained. Our society is made up of all sorts of people – good and bad. Sometimes leaders will come from the latter group. And our society is an aggressive one. This means that leaders can stay in power by intimidating and eliminating the opposition – Hitler did this on ‘The Night of the Long Knives’, Stalin did it during ‘The Purges’.

I accepted Eddy’s takeover of the Titans. I allowed him to take my position. At the age of eight I displayed a quality that many great men and women in history have failed to maintain – an understanding of the masses. I never lost my awareness of what was best for the majority. When I realised they wanted another leader I did not stand in the way.

I understood Big Joe and Richard. I understood a lot of the inhabitants in Hill village. I knew a great deal about what was going on inside Hill’s homes. I could see through the walls that tried to shield families from inhospitable weather and prying eyes. I was no juvenile gossip. I never spread rumours or watched others through a telescope kept in my bedroom. I had, and still have, a gift. I have always been able to look at things and understand them. This talent of mine is particularly powerful when the object of my interest is a human being. Historians look at the past and explain why things happened, why we are in the situation we find ourselves in today. I look at people and know what has made them into what they are.

My story has barely begun and already I can see how you might be sceptical of the things I say. It is not difficult to explain why lots of people are reluctant to accept what they are told. We are naturally cynical. If the Loch Ness monster has been seen by a couple of hundred people, it has not been seen by many hundreds of thousands of others. The greater number is believed – we are convinced by statistics. This principle applies equally well to the notion of having a gift. For every gifted child there are thousands who are not. And those who have a particular gift may still disbelieve those of others.

I have no idea how many people have my gift. But, if you are burdened with the same ability as me, you will accept everything I say. The millions (I am also an optimist) who are not so fortunate, have the hardest task – they will have to *try* and believe me.

The Titans was my idea. I wanted to pass my awareness of life onto others. It seems a recurrent trait throughout human history that the few with special abilities and insights have tried to share them with the many who do not. Unfortunately, due to the inability of the masses to comprehend what is on offer, the giver often suffers. I was aware of that fact at the beginning and I decided, before the Titans was formed, that I was not going to end up being the target of a jealous crowd.

Big Joe and Richard were ideal Titans. They were innocent and needed my knowledge to prepare themselves for life in the big wide world – the one even beyond Street Comprehensive. Eddy was not and did not.

Perhaps I have given a little too much away already. That name I keep mentioning, the ‘E’ word. I keep using it, it keeps slipping into *my* story. I am not

trying to tease you. I see you as an equal. You may be my intellectual superior or inferior – that is of no importance. I will treat you with respect – you have bothered to follow me this far, so I will repay you by telling it as it happened. I want you to have the benefit of studying the unusual series of events that I encountered. The reason I keep talking about Eddy is that he became so entwined in my life at the time – as you will find out. I want you to know everything. I refuse to hide the truth.

Eddy is also the one person I have never managed to understand. He evades me. I can only describe his actions and their consequences. Well, everyone has their Achilles' heel – even Achilles did! When you discover what happened, perhaps you will form an opinion of Eddy. I am trying to understand him myself as I retell my story.

Eddy was a chaotic element hurled into my stable life. Eddy was the piranha put into my goldfish bowl. A better comparison would be to liken him to the myxomatosis-carrying rabbit that brought its disease to the warren in the wood near Big Joe's father's farm. But that allegory fails on two counts. It fails because I knew where Eddy came from but no-one knows where that rabbit came from. And it fails because I have no idea what Eddy was infected with.

Back to me. This is after all my story! You must want to know what I am like. I am similar to Jesus Christ.

Christ's teachings were wonderful. Like Miss Arks he believed in sharing. She would only let us eat a sweet in class if we were willing to offer one to everyone. (She made an exception for cough sweets because health is too important an issue to get mixed-up with politics.) Incidentally, Miss Arks was probably responsible for the sale of more cough sweets at Five Bells Store than any cold virus. Perhaps Mr and Mr Roberts gave her a percentage of the profits earned from their sale.

Jesus did more than preach. He did things. That is where the main similarity between us lies. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. He showed them that he was no better than them. He was their servant, their friend and their leader. He physically removed the dirt from their tired feet. He did not just talk about respecting his followers, he demonstrated it. Eventually we are all remembered for what we have done, not what we have said. We all know Jesus cured the sick but we cannot be sure of his exact words. Jesus fortified his teachings with demonstrations: he calmed waters; he fed thousands; he predicted the future and he rose from the dead. Words are never enough. Jesus served human kind.

The motto of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst is 'Serve to Lead'. The Prince of Wales proclaims 'Ich Dien' (I serve) on every two pence piece. British Airways paint 'Fly to serve' on their planes. I agree. To be responsible for others implies looking after them. I picked up that pearl of wisdom long before I heard of those great British institutions. I discovered it for myself by experiencing what my parents did not do.

My mother and father were responsible for me – unless I was signed over to Miss Arks for a school trip. They were to blame for my arrival in this world. They should have accepted their responsibility towards me and taught me about life, prepared me for it. I should have benefited from their knowledge and experience. They saw things differently. I stood in the way of their easy-running lives. I was a

major interruption in my Mother's career. And although I only caused a minor hiccup in my Father's professional existence, I remained to him a hungry parasite – feeding on his hard-earned resources. I did not block his intestines but I did stand in the way of his freedom.

I did not starve. My physical well-being was catered for and my parents made sure I was aware of it. I was made to feel guilty for all my good fortune. Every mouthful of food I took from them prodded at my tender conscience as it was bustled towards my grateful stomach. My parents kept me alive but they did not tend to any of my other needs.

They demonstrated how not to do things though. They punished me. They taught me not to leave food on my plate and not to get caught doing wrong. They did not teach me how to choose between right and wrong. If I made a mistake I found out about it. But they never provided answers to my questions – so I formed my own. I did things. I was a doer! 'Lead by example' is a motto I have never forgotten. I still believe in it.

Big Joe was capable of doing things but needed guidance. Richard was too heavily influenced by avoidance to be any good at getting things done. He was better at looking-out, out on the edge somewhere, not too involved. Getting involved never bothered me. I formed the Titans. I knew my fellow Titans – understood them. I led and served the Titans. I was the oldest. I would make plans and ensure they were executed. I was the head executive – and I would execute our policies. I was a Titan, I was *the* Titans.

[<Index>](#)

THE TITANS

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