# The Clifton Club.

Alighting the # 1 bus as it lurches to a stop just around the corner from the house, Justin finds himself shoulder to shoulder with all sorts of shapes and sizes of Bristolians. The sheer diversity of this motely crew prompts him to speculate about how the ‘vanity of small differences’ plays out along this bus route, as it processes from furthest North to darkest South Bristol, touching upon most social class and socio-economic groups along the way. Some passengers are clutching fancy bags scored from megastores at Cribbs Causeway, the out-of-town shopping Mall not far down the motorway from Magic Carpet. Other passengers hail from the depths of the downbeat Southmead estate, heading for a night out in the emporium pubs around Corn Street, later to process to the all-night bars on the Waterfront. He suspects that for this group, some pre-loading of cheap vodka has been indulged in at home, to give the night a kick-start and the wallet some relief.

Sitting in front of this group, and trying to distance themselves from it, Justin notices a well-heeled, elderly couple from Henbury, clutching their theatre tickets for the Old Vic, and probably wishing they had booked an Uber instead of rubbing shoulders with the hoi poloi. But there again they did have their free bus passes, and it could well be that their lives are those of the shabby chic, their fortunes in decline, just like Tom Rakewell of tapestry fame, despite keeping up appearances to the contrary. It occurs to him that no one talks across these class divides; the expression of any sense of excitement at the prospect at the evening in store is repressed until they are safe amid their own tribes. Justin was reminded that everyone is accepted in Britain until they open their mouths, at which point they are betrayed by their accent, their class revealed, and judgment invited.

After a valedictory ‘Cheers Droive’ – the mandatory parting phrase to all Bristol bus drivers - he strides up Queens Road for the second time that day towards the Clifton club, snuggled inconspicuously in the Mall, within the heart of Clifton Village. It seems small from the front, but he learns that it extends a long way back, deep into the Village, without ever being seen. He had walked past it innumerable times yet never noticed its existence. Yet now he is poised at the point of entry to this cloaked world.

He is greeted at the polished door by an extremely polite young man, apologetically beseeching him to ‘bear with’ and wait in the lobby, while he runs an errand for an elderly guest, who needs helping climbing into his waiting car. Justin is more than happy to be left alone to browse the information board and assorted brochures scattered across the entrance hall. He learns that the Club is “not a place to network… rather one comes to be connected by your club.” Justin enjoys this dig at the modernisers who reduce all human conversation to a network opportunity, but is not so sure about the notion that human bonding is dependent on elite tribal affiliation. Not when one man’s bonding is dependent on another mans bondage. He holds back on that thought, remembering that he promised Joy not to bring up the topic of slavery too early on his first visit. He reads the next notice:

‘190 years old, the club bears a strong mercantilist tradition with links to the Merchant Venturers. Historically the club's membership has included the heads of major Bristol businesses, local landed gentry and the “higher echelons of the professions.” ’ Justin guesses that by this they mean lawyers, doctors, judges, the odd professor. And probably estate agents. Reading on, he learns that.

‘Exclusively men only for most of those years, the club did not permit women members until 2006. Membership must be gained on the invitation and recommendation of at least two members of good standing who have each known the candidate for at least three years.’

Before he is able to learn more of this fascinating den of protected entitlement and white privilege, the well-scrubbed young man returns to escort him along the paneled corridor – passing endless venerable paintings of endless venerable men - to a chandeliered room, where he is greeted by the supposedly royally-endorsed host for the evening, Tarquin Crouch, who welcomes him warmly to the club, asking,

‘Have you come far?’ And then, determining from Justin’s response that Westbury was not a suburb he wish to spend any conversational time on, encourages Justin to ‘grab a glass of bubbles’ and go mingle with the others.

Bubbles duly in hand, Justin circles the throng, pausing to listen for a while to the distinctive susurrus of coaches sniffing each other out, while ostensibly talking shop. One clustered conversation concerns the impossibility of parking in Clifton, a conversation Justin avoids lest he reveals that he came by bus. Another cluster is subtly, but nevertheless competitively, comparing coaching courses and conferences they have attended at various venues throughout the world. It would seem that the further-flung the event, the better the quality of learning.

Much of this chatter relates to celebrity coaches they may know, or claim to know, or are close to: which leads in turn to discussing which coaching celebrity is trending and which is not; which guru has introduced the latest ground breaking idea; all of this bragging is interspersed with sad tales of erstwhile coaching luminaries whose ideas have been thoroughly debunked; those whose flame is now dimmed, those who are recently disgraced, those who are ill and those who have died. Justin detects a barely contained malice underlying these tales of fallings from grace of the once great ones, even a grim satisfaction in knowing that in the end, celebrity does not protect their mortality.

Another rather more plebian group seem transfixed by the grandeur of the club itself, unable to talk of anything else, all eyes fixed on the cherubs around the dado rail, while the cluster in the centre of the room are rather loudly selling their latest coaching products and toolkits to each other, or at least practicing their elevator sales pitches. One of this merry group is waving a copy of her latest publication, ‘Making your Client’s Parachute Fly’, thrust high in the air, for all to see and acclaim. Justin is well aware that such publications are as much elaborate visiting cards, as they are capturing any thing of intrinsic worth. He has seen these books used a vehicle to capture prospective clients’ attention; an attention gained through the suggestive power that a publisher somewhere deemed their ideas worthy of print, without anyone bothering to delve deep enough to discern whether in fact these bright covers contained any ideas of enduring worth.

Justin floats among these threads of conversation, clutching his now flat Prosecco as some sort of amulet, as he has not yet landed on a conversational gossamer that he would wish to weave into something more substantial. On the other hand he is bursting to share his good news regarding newly acquired client work, with someone, anyone, but holds back on this impulse, in part through not wishing to brag, but also through fearing that pride may come before the fall.

Not before time, the flamboyant host, somewhat more ruddy cheeked than before, puts an end to this frippery and calls the congregation to order. He welcomes all participants to the first meeting of the “South West Coaching Chrysalis network,” trusting that all will feel renewed and enlightened by the end of the session; enlightened if not ‘exactly bursting from our pupa.’ Clearly the idea of naming the group ‘Chrysalis’ was not a title that Tarquin enthusiastically embraced, but one that he would sardonically indulge, in a nod to modernism. He thanks all those who had paid their subscriptions online, while glaring meaningfully around the room to scout out those who might be freeloading. He reminds all that embossed CPD certificates will be issued only to those who have paid up. A grim warning indeed.

He then invites the group, in ‘time-honoured fashion,’ to go around the room and introduce themselves. Some look more awkward and less confident than others at this prospect. A newcomer mutters something about suffering from ‘impostor syndrome’, while others take centre stage with aplomb, elaborating their well-garnished histories. Justin feels some discomfort that while everyone seems to have dressed up especially to match these auspicious surroundings, he sports oven-chip grease and traces of dried baked bean on his jeans. He is consoled, though, by the fact that the man sitting to his right did not seem to have received the email regarding dress code either. In fact he seems even scruffier than Justin, with the bottom of his jeans legs fraying, his shoes scuffed and worn. While scanning the group, Justin half listen to the various declarations of coaching identity that echo around the room.

‘I am freelance, have been for many years’

‘I am an executive coach who specialises in strategic reframing.’

‘I work in the educational sector’

‘I have just completed my basic training and am so excited to be in such awesome company’

‘I am university based, both researching and teaching coaching’

‘I was an in-company coach, but am now I am branching out on my own, and need to build my support networks.’

‘I am a retired HR director, who has moved into pro-bono coaching, to give something back from all my rich experience.’

‘I am a recovering management consultant.’

‘I am a full-time coaching supervisor, and trainer of other supervisors.’

‘I am a qualified master coach, and also for my sins I am Chair of the national committee of the Federation of Coaches, UK division.’

This ritual survived, Justin gazes at the twinkling chandelier that has surely illuminated more august gatherings, when the cravatted host announces that,

‘ Thank you for those pen pictures. Now for the main event. We are graced with two speakers to enlighten us tonight, one to speak on “Neuro-catastrophic approaches to systemic breakdowns” – Tarquin sniggers somewhat as he stutters over these words in his prompt card – ‘while the other speaker will cover “coaching credentials and how to choose among them”; a topic that I feel sure close to all our hearts, in this increasingly regulated world.’

The enthusiastic Neuro-catastrophic speaker delivers a Ted Talk lite, dazzling all before him with colorful videos of brain synapses ‘firing and wiring.’ The talk is polished but the content somewhat thin, unless one is easily convinced by a blizzard of quasi-scientific terminology. Furthermore, in the light of recent personal events, Justin did not need more reminders of the imminent demise of his own at-risk family. Despite the chairperson Tarquin seeming to fall asleep at the side of the podium, the speaker ploughs on deeper and deeper into the world of quantum physics, elucidating the power of strange attractors, before grinding to a synaptic halt with his grand finale – a waving of his ‘Neuro-catastrophic toolkit for coaches’, now available online and in hardback.

The Question & Answer time is mercifully short and sweet, partly because most of the questions relating to practical applications of these concepts were diverted by the speaker towards the need for his interlocutors to read the toolkit -or even better, to come along to his next weekend workshop and become licensed in the technique. ‘Discounts will apply to all Chrysalis members. And save even more if you take up my early bird offers.’

Of much more common interest was the second topic addressing “Choosing coaching credentials.” After a preliminary sharing of statistics revealing historic coaching credential choices and their apparent efficacy, the speaker invites each in turn to reveal their orientation towards credentials, whether at a personal level, or in general way. He explains that his interest in these responses is far from casual. In fact he would like, with permission, to audiotape responses, then add them to his growing research database. No one demurs from this request. Justin feels flattered that his half-baked opinions might be research worthy at all, while remaining sceptical that this vox pop of the converted might be construed as critical research. Tarquin loudly declares that his own paper on credentials, written ten years ago, was the probably the last word on this matter, though he was prepared to be open-minded, as always. Justin allowed that this non-sequitor was an attempt at irony; though he was swiftly coming to realise that one can never be sure what might pass for irony at this club.

As participants declare their interests and credentialing biases around the room, they hear at first from the Pollyannaish newbie, who believes that coaching will save the world, and who wants to never stop learning and collecting credentials, even up to doctoral level. She is countered by the far more sceptical and fidgety newbie sat alongside of her, who wonders even now if his investment in basic training will ever pay off. Next up is the retired grandee who would like nothing better than to mentor them both, though he himself has no appetite for more honorifics after his name, as he has, as he says, ‘been there and got the waistcoat’.

They hear from the newly graduated masters student whose main concern is that credential awards must in future must be evidence based, with particular attention being paid to measuring outcomes. Her view is supported by the Federation of Coaches grandee, who is clearly our self-appointed guardian of professional ethics. He reminds us of the need for professional bodies to protect us from the predations of bogus licensees. Somewhat oblivious to this, the woman with the parachute book (said publication now lowered somewhat discreetly from above her head to rest, outward facing, in her lap,) says her approach is entirely validated and proven through a peer-review process conducted in California. Neuro-catastrophic man is quick to add that his toolkit licences are kosher too. Justin’s ragged-trousered neighbour - who reveals that his background is in grief counselling - says that he feels there is little need for any credentials at all, just as long as unconditional attention and deep empathy are present at any coaching session, to cause ‘the shift in the room.’

The wellness expert has some sympathy with this sentiment, while the ex-sports coach says that, ‘It all comes down to winning and losing at the end of the day. It is all about seeking marginal gains, however microscopic. Coaching is fine and dandy but you have to ask: does it make the boat go any faster? ‘ The meditation guru simply smiles at all of this, indulgently suggesting that, ‘were the Buddha present, he would keep pouring tea into each of the cups of we apprentices until the tea spills over.’ Justin feels sure the guru was pleased that his esoteric wisdom was captured on tape, to be added to the research data base.

The credentials speaker who has unleashed all of this does his best to somehow pull this conversation into some sort of synthesis.

‘What I hear from around the room – and I do thank you all for contributing to this seminal research - confirms my preliminary findings that the field of coaching credentials is highly fragmented; and that, putting modesty aside, that my ten-point template for credential integration – you will find the flyers at the table on the way out - is one of the few hopes we have of ever unifying the field. My intention of course is to anonymise all of your responses and to fit them within my proven frame. But if any of you wish for your quote to be specifically attributed then do please let me know. Equally if you want to engage with this inquiry further, then I would be delighted to include you. Please come speak to me afterwards and register your interest. And do take a sneak-peek at the toolkit too.’

The chairmn Tarquin – perhaps the most commercially successful and acclaimed of all there present – smiles benignly, saying how fascinating it is to hear all of these contrasting views being expressed within the same room, from people supposedly pursuing the same line of work. He says he is particularly intrigued to hear of the need for supervisors to have supervisors of their own, to keep out of trouble. He muses that it all rather reminds him of the time when the denizens of this club had a ‘gentleman’s gentleman’, though he felt sure it was not quite the same thing. Pausing for the laughter that does not come, he concludes that the whole conversation reinforces his personal position that he will not commit to gaining any coaching credential whatsoever until he is convinced that this qualification will cause his clients to think even more highly of him than they already do. Which he so far he thinks is highly unlikely. (Again, Justin’s virtual irony detector wobbles all over the place, the needle never settling.)

On that modest parting note, Tarquin thanks the speakers for taking the time to lead the group out of our pupa towards enlightenment, then invites them, ‘to relax within the confines of this room over coffee, but please not to go AWOL anywhere else within the rest of the club, where members’ privacy is sacrosanct.’ In the silence they hear from the next room the sound of snooker balls rattling one into another, following a set of rules laid down centuries ago, rules that will never be subverted. Justin’s dishevelled neighbour turns to whisper, ‘how reassuring it must be to live in a world where everyone knows exactly what they are doing, and how far they are allowed to go.’