



Extract from

The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid

by Bill Bryson

Bill is describing his childhood:

Other long periods of the day were devoted to just seeing what would happen – what would happen if you pinched a match-head while it was still hot or made a vile drink and took a tip of it or focused a white-hot beam of sunlight with a magnifying glass on your Uncle Dick's bald spot while he was napping. (What happened was that you burned an amazingly swift, deep hole that would leave Dick and a team of specialists at Iowa Lutheran Hospital puzzled for weeks.)

Thanks to such investigations and the abundance of time that made them possible, I knew more things in the first ten years of my life that I believe I have known at any time since. I knew everything there was to know about our house for a start. I knew what was written on the undersides of tables and what the view was like from the tops of bookcases and wardrobes. I knew what was to be found at the back of every closet, which beds has most dust-balls beneath them, which ceiling the most interesting stains, and where exactly the patterns in wallpaper repeated.

I knew how to cross every room in the house without touching the floor, where my father kept his spare change and how much you could safely take without his noticing (one seventh of the quarters, one-fifth of the nickels and dimes, as many of the pennies as you could carry). I knew how to relax in an arm-chair in more than one hundred positions and on the floor in approximately seventy-five more. I knew what the world looked like when viewed through a Jell-O lens. I knew how things tasted – damp washcloths, pencil ferrules, coins and buttons, almost anything made of plastic that was smaller than, say, a clock radio, mucus of every variety of course – in a way that I have more or less forgotten now.

I knew how to get between any two properties in the neighbourhood, however tall the fence or impenetrable the hedge that separated them. I knew the feel of linoleum on bare skin and what everything smelled like at floor level. I knew pain the way you know it when it is fresh and interesting – the pain, for example, of a toasted marshmallow in your mouth when it is roughly the temperature of magma. I knew exactly how clouds drifted on a July afternoon, what rain tasted like, how ladybirds preened and caterpillars rippled, what it felt like to sit inside a bush. I knew how to appreciate a really good fart, whether mine or someone else's.

Motorbikes and Pyramids

# St. Gregory's Catholic High School



*Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman are making a TV film about riding their motorbikes from Scotland to South Africa. Here they are in Egypt but are behind schedule.*

Charley was on my outside and I rode with one hand on the bars and one in my lap; the asphalt true and grippy. For a while it seemed the land was greener, farming country perhaps, but before we knew it there was the sand again – the rubble, piles of rock littered across the horizon.

I'd been in a very bad mood and it was only just beginning to ease. I wasn't quite sure how our planning had gone so awry; it hadn't been like this when we rode round the world. I don't remember this level of tension either; we'd had our moments but this time we seemed to go from one petty squabble to another.

Giza came up quicker than I expected, so preoccupied was I with my thoughts. All at once the driving worsened, the cars came thick and fast and we were on the outskirts of the town. Cars were hooting, kids yelling from donkey carts and bicycles.

And then there they were. Just a glimpse to begin with, they seemed to grow up from the middle of the town itself. It took a moment to dawn: the pyramids. My God, I'd ridden my motorbike all the way to the great pyramids of Egypt.

Excitement gripped me. We funnelled into traffic; the buildings stained a dirty yellow; apartments, stalls, people everywhere peering at us and waving. We came to a checkpoint and stopped. It was early evening, the sun just beginning to set.

People wandered over to look at the bikes; mine was hot and sounded pretty gnarly. I switched the engine off.

'Hey, Ewan,' Charley said, 'there's a golf course over there. Imagine having a round of golf with the pyramids as your backdrop.' I could hear the enthusiasm in his voice. Suddenly all the tension seemed to lift. There's nothing like witnessing one of the great wonders of the world if you want to put your troubles into perspective.

Moments later we were moving up to a chequered barrier and the pyramids were right ahead of us and not quite as deep in the town as I'd thought. The road was wide and dusty; it snaked a few hundred yards to where the massive stone structures dominated the skyline. As I passed his truck, Ramy, our fixer, was standing there in his Indiana Jones hat.

'All yours,' he called.

Initially I didn't understand what he meant. Then I realised – the area was closed off for the evening, and we were the only visitors. I couldn't believe it. Not only had I ridden my bike to the pyramids, now we had them to ourselves. Two colossal structures, they lifted from the desert with Cairo on one side and an ancient expanse of nothingness on the other. I was speechless, standing on the foot-pegs of my bike as if in homage.

# St. Gregory's Catholic High School



An excerpt from "Angela's Ashes," published by Scribner, in which Frank McCourt recounts the day of his First Communion:

The night before I was so excited I couldn't sleep till dawn. I'd still be sleeping if my grandmother hadn't come banging at the door.

Get up! Get up! Get that child outa the bed. Happiest day of his life an' him snorin' above in the bed.

I ran to the kitchen. Take off that shirt, she said. I took off the shirt and she pushed me into a tin tub of icy cold water. My mother scrubbed me, my grandmother scrubbed me. I was raw, I was red.

They dried me. They dressed me in my black velvet First Communion suit with the white frilly shirt, the short pants, the white stockings, the black patent leather shoes. Around my arm they tied a white satin bow and on my lapel they pinned the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a picture of the Sacred Heart, with blood dripping from it, flames erupting all around it and on top a nasty-looking crown of thorns.

Come here till I comb your hair, said Grandma. Look at that mop, it won't lie down. You didn't get that hair from my side of the family. That's that North of Ireland hair you got from your father. That's the kind of hair you see on Presbyterians. If your mother had married a proper decent Limerickman you wouldn't have this standing up, North of Ireland, Presbyterian hair.

She spat twice on my head.

Grandma, will you please stop spitting on my head.

If you have anything to say, shut up. A little spit won't kill you. Come on, we'll be late for the Mass.

We ran to the church. My mother panted along behind with Michael in her arms. We arrived at the church just in time to see the last of the boys leaving the altar rail where the priest stood with the chalice and the host, glaring at me. Then he placed on my tongue the wafer, the body and blood of Jesus. At last, at last.

It's on my tongue. I draw it back.

It stuck.

I had God glued to the roof of my mouth. I could hear the master's voice, Don't let that host touch your teeth for if you bite God in two you'll roast in hell for eternity.

I tried to get God down with my tongue but the priest hissed at me, Stop that clucking and get back to your seat.

God was good. He melted and I swallowed Him and now, at last, I was a member of the True Church, an official sinner.

# St. Gregory's Catholic High School



## Year 6 Transition Project Summer 2020

### Writing your autobiography

Read the three autobiography extracts.

- What do they have in common?
- What makes each one different?
- Which one did you like best? Why?
- Draw a picture showing the events depicted in each extract.

You are going to write your own autobiography, picking out key moments in your life so far.

We are going to start with a timeline of your life, for example:

2008

I was born in  
Birmingham

2012

We moved  
to Warrington

2018

Won my first  
dance competition

---

2010

My brother was born

2016

Family holiday to Spain

# St. Gregory's Catholic High School



An autobiography is your chance to tell your story!

You don't have to include everything that's happened to you but just pick out your top memories.

Think about:

- Birthdays or Christmases
- Holidays
- Your best days out
- Starting school
- Starting a new hobby
- Moving house
- Any other important events or memories

As you describe these events you are going to tell them in chronological order, which means in the order they happened. Other key features of an autobiography are using first person, I and describing events in detail, often using the senses.

Think about one of the events you will include.

What could you see?	
What could you hear?	
How did you feel?	
Was there a particular smell or taste that you associate with this event?	

# St. Gregory's Catholic High School



Now you are going to begin.

I'd like you to start with some facts about your birth: Where were you born? When? Who is in your family?

Then think about your earliest memory. What do you remember? Is it a clear memory or just pictures in your head?

Now plan out the rest of your autobiography.

Start a new paragraph every time you move onto a new event.

Include pictures or even photographs (with permission) if you can.

## Challenge Extension

Some people like to think of a 'soundtrack' to their lives, choosing songs for each significant time in their life.

If you like, you could make a CD cover to accompany your autobiography.

Have fun and see you in September!