

**Thirsty**  
by  
**Freda Volans**

Claire walked into the classroom with a ladder in her tights.

When she'd parked the car that morning she'd seen two Year Nines lurking behind the bins. A coil of smoke was unwinding itself, disappearing into the fog over the playground. She had swung out of the driving seat.

"Hey Miss, nice legs!"

"Right - put that thing out and get into school."

She'd peered over the bins at the source of the smoke, "Joe Patterson, put out the cancer stick and don't try to be clever."

Joe was leaning against a wheelie bin, one arm draped over the lid. "Cancer stick! That's sooo yesterday."

His friend snorted.

Claire squeezed through the gap between the skip and some rejects from Design and Tech. "Look, the bell's about to go; don't make this an issue."

Joe eyed her legs, stretched his neck and blew out three smoke-rings.

They were A-star smoke-rings, the kind that the boy next door used to make, the kind Claire would push her ring-finger through, saying she'd married a ghost. She watched the boys smoke, two grey smudges of fog.

Across the playground drilled the bell.

Slowly, the boys stood up, taking final drags. Claire made her way out. "Damn!" She'd caught her tights on something.

The sound of laughter followed her across the tarmac.

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She pulled the hem of her skirt down. It was an *M & S* above-the-knee skirt, and she'd thought it would do for school.

It wasn't doing. Mark was staring at her legs. Finn was whispering to Alan from Mrs. Dickson's class; Sandra's freckles were melting into one blotchy grin.

"... Today we're going to explore the language of persuasion ..."

Finn now had a biro dangling from one nostril; Stuart was playing with something on his lap. She hoped it was his mobile. Alan's hand was waving maniacally.

"Yes?"

"Clusters of three miss. Like three describing words, to make your point."

"That's good. Could you give us an example?"

"School is rotten, cold and boring."

Titters from the class. Finn's biro was snorted onto the desk. Alan recoiled from the snot. What *was* Alan doing in this class?

"Let's give it a more positive twist, shall we?" Claire tugged at her skirt. Through the window she could see Mr Deans in bullet-proof vest, edging across the tarmac, sidestepping crisp-bag and chocolate-wrapper shrapnel, dodging round the rose bush whose sooty leaves and leggy stems were visible proof that evolution was alive and kicking in Coatrudge High.

"First of all, I want you to think about *why* you might need to make your language persuasive ..."

Two hands popped up. She ignored Alan's. "Yes, Charlie?"

"To score with Anne-Marie, Miss."

Howls of laughter, banging of desks, and Stuart on the floor in the aisle. Outside, Mr. Deans was peeling a plastic bag off his trousers.

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## George Hummer Prize for Creative Writing 2012

### 100<sup>th</sup> Chipping Norton Music Festival

The staff room was near-hysteria kept in check by sandwiches. She chose a seat next to David from Guidance. A football exploded in the window. Someone closed the blinds.

“So, how are things in English?” David was crumpled, asking to be ironed flat.

“Same. Busy. Moira’s having a baby.” Claire opened her lunchbox. She’d forgotten the humus.

“I wondered why she looked so ... When’s it due?”

“David I need to ask you something.”

“Ask away.”

“It’s Joe. Smoking. I found him and someone, by the bins.”

“I take it you mean Patterson?”

“Yes, they didn’t give a damn.” She waved a forkful of watercress over his folder, “What are the rules for - no one does anything...”

David backed away. “There is a system ...”

“The file-it-away system. Can’t you talk to him?”

David chewed. “Joe’s got everyone on his back as it is: Dad, teachers, Outreach ...” He opened a can of coke. “Have you filed a blue referral?”

“Yeah, that’ll help.” She could sense the give-away tremble in her voice. She left her salad and headed for the door - there’d be time to reach the corner shop, buy a new pair of tights.

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The plastic clock above the blackboard said seven minutes past three. It ticked steadily through Joanne’s stolid reading. Her hair was scraped back, tied with a rubber band.

“That’s great, Joanne. Billy - you go next.”

“Jet was dist ...distracted...”

“Distraught.”

“Jet was distraught...” Billy continued.

Claire glanced out of the window; the fog had lifted and a pale afternoon light stroked the playground. It was deserted, apart from something over there, near the gates, a solitary figure kicking a can.

Joe.

He looked up, raised one hand and, although it was too far to see his eyes, she was sure he was smiling.

“Now, can anyone tell me what distraught means ... Yes, Joanne?”

“Does it mean he was thirsty Miss?”

Claire looked at Joanne, at her pale face, her thin polyester top. She wanted to say yes it means thirsty; you’re coming on leaps and bounds ... “Well, that’s a good guess, maybe you’re thinking of drought? Let’s open the dictionaries - first to find it gets to leave first - go!”

Claire looked out again. She could see the negative space where Joe had been, between the black iron post and the rowan tree in its metal cage.

“I’ve found it Miss!” Joanne flapped her dictionary.

But when the bell rang, Joanne rejected her prize. “I’m not in any hurry, anyways.” She took a plastic bottle of juice from her schoolbag. “We’re having spaghetti tonight - how about you?”

“Me? ... I haven’t decided yet...” Claire saw Joanne watching her, “Well, maybe I’ll have pasta too - I’m quite hungry.”

“Spaghetti or macaroni?”

“I think I’ll have tagliatelli.”

Joanne’s eyes opened wide. “You’re having me on!”

“Nope, I’ll have tagliatelli, and there are some olives in the fridge.”

Joanne’s face wrinkled up, “They’re minging!”

“One man’s meat ...”

They tidied up the jotters together, Joanne chattering, Claire listening, while the afternoon drifted onwards and the straggly rose bush blossomed in the dusk.