

## *Selling LipService*

“If I was going to create a sort of secret language, why not sell the words to my classmates? That’s not so different to LipService is it? It’s a tried-and-tested business model. I was so proud of myself. There would be words for ordinary things like teachers (shirties) or parents (rent pairs) so they wouldn’t know when we were talking about them and words for things that just deserved to have a single expression, like ‘on an urchin quest’ (from questioner) referring to someone like my Dad who never sounded convinced by their own LipService. I could call my language ‘Wardsback’ because the words were roughly reversed versions of familiar ones and they pushed back at the old meanings the way wearing a woolly jumper back to front tugs at the throat and armpits.

Faith played with her hair for a long time when I told her about the idea and I felt like a piece of CheezPleez left in the sun – dry and curling at the edges and sweaty in the middle. She probably didn’t believe that any of my ideas could be buyonormative. But she couldn’t think of any reason to junk it and she got more and more excited about making money with absolutely no overheads.

I remember the first word I sold was ‘ox parade’ (from paradox) for when a grown-up’s LipService drift seemed to say one thing but you were pretty sure they meant another. Poppy, who smelled of condensed milk, bought it, which was surprising because she was really quiet. I wrote the words and their definitions on old LipService patch backings, folded them up and put them in a jar. The customer stuck a hand in and pulled one out. Faith insisted that we charge a minimal once-off subscription per user over and above the original buyer.

‘Who cares about that?’ I said, ‘Wouldn’t it be lexicool if the other kids used my words? And besides how would we ever keep track of who was allowed to use which words?’

‘That’s the genius of the haemorrhage and LipService, isn’t it? Built-in control. I’ll just have to work on an accounting system,’ replied Faith.

I didn’t know how her head, which was mine, could ever possibly hold all those columns and double entries. But I needed her approval so that I could tell myself that I wasn’t doing anything

wrong.

I hadn't been sure if Poppy liked her word. Until I overheard her best friend whisper to her in a corridor, 'Ms Marshal put on a real ox parade in there over contrabrand, what was she trying to say?'

'Oh, who knows? The bull really had her by its horns,' Poppy replied and they both tittered.

They were using my word! I had my gloves on but I was doused in the shiver and prickle of ginger ale, my skin goosed in a mimicry of the bubbles. There were more buyers every day after that, in fact I had a hard time thinking up enough words for all the kids that crowded around my table at lunch wanting to dip into the 'gun jar' (jargon). Some of them were duds but I thought quite a few were really great, like 'lexity perp' (from perplexity) for an adult whose LipService was complete gibberish, 'showman pros' (from promotions) for kids who were already so into their chosen brand they made the rest of us look like flip-floppers and 'get tarred' (from targeted) referring to the kids who just couldn't wrap their heads around brand awareness.

I even stopped missing the skin tastes. I could go almost a whole day without thinking about them until it came to the Turkish delight hour. With skin tastes, the hollow of my palate was the broom closet I escaped to, now Wardsback had made it the auditorium where I led the hordes in recitation. Each of my words echoed off all those other tongues. I was no longer a singularity; I was we, the multiplicity. I felt large, bigger than the other kids. And I was doing big things. There was quality control – not just of the words themselves but also listening out to make sure no one was using them incorrectly or unrightfully. We had 'fire nutties' (notifiers) – and they did like to watch others get burned – to help with that. They were paid to eavesdrop on schoolyard conversations. Based on their intelligence, the wrist rotors (terrorists) could be sent in to twist arms and punish offenders.

I know I should've thought more about all that. Somehow it just grew out of Faith's subscription programme, the way in winter you forget to cut your toenails until one spring day you find you have hideous claws that can rake anyone who stands too close. I

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tell myself I didn't actively set it all up. I don't remember recruiting. But I came up with the names. Is naming something the same as assuming responsibility for it?"