

Irwin Turner then, or Ingres.
 Rudge Is he an old master, sir?
 Timms 'About suffering, they were never wrong,' sir,
 'The Old Masters . . . how it takes place
 While someone else is eating or opening a window . . .'
 Irwin Have you done that with Mr Hector?
 Timms Done what, sir?
 Irwin The poem. You were quoting somebody. Auden.
 Timms Was I, sir? Sometimes it just flows out. Brims
 over.
 Irwin Why does he lock the door?
They turn to each other in mock surprise.
 Akthar Lock the door? Does he lock the door?
 Lockwood It's locked against the Forces of Progress, sir.
 Crowther The spectre of Modernity.
 Akthar It's locked against the future, sir.
 Posner It's just that he doesn't like to be interrupted, sir.
 Crowther Creep.
 Akthar You have to lock the doors, sir. We are a nation
 of shoplifters, sir.
 Lockwood It's excrement, sir. The tide of.
 Timms And there's sexual intercourse, too, sir. They do it
 at bus stops, everyone young going down the long slide
 to happiness endlessly, sir.
 Akthar Free as bloody birds, sir.
 Crowther Disgusting.

Irwin Does he have a programme? Or is it just at random?
 Boys Ask him, sir. We don't know, sir.
 Akthar It's just the knowledge, sir.
 Timms The pursuit of it for its own sake, sir.
 Posner Not useful, sir. Not like your lessons.
 Akthar Breaking bread with the dead, sir. That's what we
 do.
 Irwin What it used to be called is 'wider reading'.
 Lockwood Oh no, sir. It can be narrower reading. Mr
 Hector says if we know one book off by heart, it doesn't
 matter if it's really crap. The Prayer Book, sir. *The
 Mikado*, the *Pigeon Fancier's Gazette* . . . so long as it's
 words, sir. Words and worlds.
 Crowther And the heart.
 Lockwood Oh yes, sir. The heart.
 'The heart has its reasons that reason knoweth not,' sir.
 Crowther Pascal, sir.
 Lockwood It's higher than your stuff, sir. Nobler.
 Posner Only not useful, sir. Mr Hector's not as focused.
 Timms No, not focused at all, sir. Blurred, sir, more.
 Akthar You're much more focused, sir.
 Crowther And we know what we're doing with you, sir.
 Half the time with him we don't know what we're doing
 at all. (*Mimes being mystified.*)
 Timms We're poor little sheep that have lost our way, sir.
 Where are we?
 Akthar You're very young, sir. This isn't your gap year, is
 it, sir?

Irwin I wish it was.

Lockwood Why, sir? Do you not like teaching us, sir?
We're not just a hiccup between the end of university
and the beginning of life, like Auden, are we, sir?

Dakin Do you like Auden, sir?

Irwin Some.

Dakin Mr Hector does, sir. We know about Auden.
He was a schoolmaster for a bit, sir.

Irwin I believe he was, yes.

Dakin He was, sir. Do you think he was more like you or
more like Mr Hector?

Irwin I've no idea. Why should he be like either of us?

Dakin I think he was more like Mr Hector, sir.

A bit of a shambles.

He snogged his pupils. Auden, sir. Not Mr Hector.

Irwin You know more about him than I do.

Dakin

'Lay your sleeping head, my love,
Human on my faithless arm.'

That was a pupil, sir. Shocking, isn't it?

Irwin So you could answer a question on Auden, then?

Boys How, sir?

No, sir.

That's in the exam, sir.

Timms Mr Hector's stuff's not meant for the exam, sir.
It's to make us more rounded human beings.

Irwin This examination will be about everything and
anything you know and are.

If there's a question about Auden or whoever and you

know about it, you must answer it.

Akthar We couldn't do that, sir.
That would be a betrayal of trust.
Laying bare our souls, sir.

Lockwood Is nothing sacred, sir?
We're shocked.

Posner I would, sir.
And they would. They're taking the piss.

Lockwood

'England, you have been here too long
And the songs you sing now are the songs you sung
On an earlier day, now they are wrong.'

Irwin Who's that?

Lockwood Don't you know, sir?

Irwin No.

Lockwood Sir!

It's Stevie Smith, sir. Of 'Not Waving but Drowning'
fame.

Irwin Well, don't tell me that is useless knowledge.

You get an essay on post-imperial decline, losing an
empire and finding a role, all that stuff, that quote is the
perfect way to end it.

Akthar Couldn't do that, sir.

It's not education. It's culture.

Irwin How much more stuff like that have you got up
your sleeves?

The bell goes.

Lockwood All sorts, sir!
The train! The train!

Scripps plays a theme from Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto.

Posner (*Celia Johnson*) I really meant to do it. I stood there right on the edge.

But I couldn't. I wasn't brave enough.

I would like to be able to say it was the thought of you and the children that prevented me but it wasn't. I had no thoughts at all.

Only an overwhelming desire not to feel anything at all ever again.

Not to be unhappy any more.

I went back into the refreshment room.

That's when I nearly fainted.

Irwin What is all this?

Scripps (*Cyril Raymond*) Laura.

Posner (*Celia Johnson*) Yes, dear.

Scripps (*Cyril Raymond*) Whatever your dream was, it wasn't a very happy one was it?

Posner (*Celia Johnson*) No.

Scripps (*Cyril Raymond*) Is there anything I can do to help?

Posner (*Celia Johnson*) You always help, dear.

Scripps (*Cyril Raymond*) You've been a long way away. Thank you for coming back to me.

She cries and he embraces her.

Irwin God knows why you've learned *Brief Encounter*.

Boys Oh very good, sir. Full marks, sir.

Irwin But I think you ought to know this lesson has been a complete waste of time.

Dakin Like Mr Hector's lessons then, sir. They're a waste of time, too.

Irwin Yes, you little smart-arse, but he's not trying to get you through an exam.

Staff room.

Mrs Lintott So have the boys given you a nickname?

Irwin Not that I'm aware of.

Mrs Lintott A nickname is an achievement . . . both in the sense of something won and also in its armorial sense of a badge, a blazon.

Unsurprisingly, I am Tot or Totty. Some irony there, one feels.

Irwin Hector has no nickname.

Mrs Lintott Yes he has: Hector.

Irwin But he's called Hector.

Mrs Lintott And that's his nickname too. He isn't called Hector. His name's Douglas, though the only person I've ever heard address him as such is his somewhat unexpected wife.

Irwin Posner came to see me yesterday. He has a problem.

Mrs Lintott No nickname, but at least you get their problems. I seldom do.

Posner Sir, I think I may be homosexual.

Irwin Posner, I wanted to say, you are not yet in a position to be anything.

Mrs Lintott You're young, of course. I never had that advantage.

Posner I love Dakin.

Irwin Does Dakin know?

Posner Yes. He doesn't think it's surprising. Though Dakin likes girls basically.

Irwin I sympathised, though not so much as to suggest I might be in the same boat.

Mrs Lintott With Dakin?

Irwin With anybody.

Mrs Lintott That's sensible. One of the hardest things for boys to learn is that a teacher is human. One of the hardest things for a teacher to learn is not to try and tell them.

Posner Is it a phase, sir?

Irwin Do you think it's a phase?

Posner Some of the literature says it will pass.

Irwin I wanted to say that the literature may say that, but that literature doesn't.

Posner I'm not sure I want it to pass.

But I want to get into Cambridge, sir. If I do, Dakin might love me.

Or I might stop caring.

Do you look at your life, sir?

Irwin I thought everyone did.

Posner I'm a Jew.

I'm small.

I'm homosexual.

And I live in *Sheffield*.

I'm fucked.

Mrs Lintott Did you let that go?

Irwin Fucked? Yes, I did, I'm afraid.

Mrs Lintott It's a test. A way of finding out if you've ceased to be a teacher and become a friend.

He's a bright boy. You'll see. Next time he'll go further. What else did you talk about?

Irwin Nothing.

No. Nothing.

Mrs Lintott goes.

Posner.

Posner Sir?

Irwin What goes on in Mr Hector's lessons?

Posner Nothing, sir.

Anyway, you shouldn't ask me that, sir.

Irwin Quid pro quo.

Posner I have to go now, sir.

Irwin You learn poetry. Off your own bat?

Posner Sometimes.

He makes you want to, sir.

Irwin How?

Posner It's a conspiracy, sir.

Irwin Who against?

Posner The world, sir. I hate this, sir. Can I go?

Irwin Is that why he locks the door?

Posner So that it's not part of the system, sir. Time out. Nobody's business. Useless knowledge.

Can I go, sir?

Irwin Why didn't you ask Mr Hector about Dakin?

Pause.

Posner I wanted advice, sir.

Mr Hector would just have given me a quotation.

Housman, sir, probably.

Literature is medicine, wisdom, elastoplast.

Everything. It isn't, though, is it, sir?

Scripps Posner did not say it, but since he seldom took his eyes off Dakin, he knew that Irwin looked at him occasionally too and he wanted him to say so. Basically he just wanted company.

Irwin It will pass.

Posner Yes, sir.

Irwin And Posner.

Posner Sir?

Irwin You must try and acquire the habit of contradiction. You are too much in the acquiescent mode.

Posner Yes, sir.

No, sir.

Posner accompanied by Scripps sings the last verse of 'When I Survey the Wondrous Cross'.

Dakin So all this religion, what do you do?

Scripps Go to church. Pray.

Dakin Yes?

Scripps It's so time-consuming. You've no idea.

Dakin What else?

Scripps It's what you don't do.

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Dakin You don't not wank?

Jesus. You're headed for the bin.

Scripps It's not for ever.

Dakin Yeah? Just tell me on the big day and I'll stand well back.

Scripps I figure I have to get through this romance with God now or else it'll be hanging around half my life. But I don't see why I should wish it on any other poor sod.

The parents, of course, hate it. So ageing.

Drugs they were prepared for, but not Matins.

Some of it, though, I still don't get. They reckon you have to love God because God loves you. Why? Posner loves you but it doesn't mean you have to love Posner. As it is, God's this massive case of unrequited love. He's Hector minus the motorbike.

God should get real. We don't owe him anything.

Dakin Good thing to say at Cambridge, that.

Scripps No.

Dakin Why? It's an angle.

Scripps It's private.

Dakin Fuck private.

Scripps Don't let Hector hear you say that. You're his best boy.

Test me.

Dakin What on?

Scripps T. S. Eliot.

'A painter of the Umbrian School

Designed upon a gesso ground

The nimbus of the Baptised God.

The wilderness is cracked and browned

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'But through the water pale and thin
Still shine the unoffending feet
And there above the painter set
The Father and the Paraclete.'

Dakin This is the one about the painting in the National Gallery.

Scripps Yes.

Dakin Don't tell me.

Piero della Francesca.

Actually, you know what?
We are *fucking* clever.

Scripps (*laughs*) Do you know how to seem cleverer still?
Don't say Piero della Francesca. Just say Piero.

Dakin Yes?

Scripps Apparently.

Dakin Like Elvis.

Scripps You've got it.

Dakin The more you read, though, the more you see that literature is actually about losers.

Scripps No.

Dakin It's consolation. All literature is consolation.

Scripps No, it isn't. What about when it's celebration?
Joy?

Dakin But it's written when the joy is over. Finished. So even when it's joy, it's grief. It's consolation.

That's why it gets written down.

I tell you, whatever Hector says, I find literature really lowering.

Scripps Do you really believe this?

Dakin Yes.

Scripps You're not doing a line of stuff for the exam? Original thoughts?

Dakin No.

Scripps Because it's the kind of angle Irwin would come up with.

Dakin Well, it's true he was the one who made me realise you were allowed to think like this. He sanctioned it. I didn't know you were allowed to call art and literature into question.

Scripps Think the unthinkable. Who's going to stop you? Only don't mention it to Hector.

Dakin No.

Scripps But if you reckon literature's consolation, you should try religion.

Dakin Actually it isn't wholly my idea.

Scripps No?

Dakin I've been reading this book by Kneeshaw.

Scripps Who?

Dakin (*shows him book*) Kneeshaw. He's a philosopher. Frederick Kneeshaw.

Scripps I think that's pronounced Nietzsche.

Dakin Shit. Shit. Shit.

Scripps What's the matter?

Dakin I talked to Irwin about it. He didn't correct me. He let me call him Kneeshaw. He'll think I'm a right fool. Shit.

Irwin and Hector.

Irwin It's just that the boys seem to know more than they're telling.

Hector Don't most boys?

Diffidence is surely to be encouraged.

Irwin In an examination?

They seem to have got hold of the notion that the stuff they do with you is off-limits so far as the examination is concerned.

Hector That's hardly surprising. I count examinations, even for Oxford and Cambridge, as the enemy of education. Which is not to say that I don't regard education as the enemy of education, too.

However, if you think it will help, I will speak to them.

Irwin I'd appreciate it.

For what it's worth, I sympathise with your feelings about examinations, but they are a fact of life. I'm sure you want them to do well and the gobbets you have taught them might just tip the balance.

Hector What did you call them?

Gobbets? Is that what you think they are, gobbets?

Handy little quotes that can be trotted out to make a point?

Gobbets?

Codes, spells, runes – call them what you like, but do not call them *gobbets*.

Irwin I just thought it would be useful . . .

Hector Oh, it would be useful . . . every answer a Christmas tree hung with the appropriate gobbets. Except that they're learned *by heart*. And that is where they belong and like the other components of the heart not to be defiled by being trotted out to order.

Irwin So what are they meant to be storing them up for, these boys? Education isn't something for when they're old and grey and sitting by the fire. It's for now. The exam is next month.

Hector And what happens after the exam? Life goes on. Gobbets!

Headmaster and Irwin.

Headmaster How are our young men doing?

Are they 'on stream'?

Irwin I think so.

Headmaster You think so? Are they or aren't they?

Irwin It must always be something of a lottery.

Headmaster A lottery? I don't like the sound of that,

Irwin. I don't want you to fuck up. We have been down that road too many times before.

Irwin I'm not sure the boys are bringing as much from Mr Hector's classes as they might.

Headmaster You're lucky if they bring anything at all, but I don't know that it matters. Mr Hector has an old-fashioned faith in the redemptive power of words. In my experience, Oxbridge examiners are on the lookout for something altogether snappier.

After all, it's not how much literature that they know. What matters is how much they know *about* literature.

Chant the stuff till they're blue in the face, what good does it do?

Dorothy.

Mrs Lintott has appeared and the Headmaster goes.

Mrs Lintott One thing you will learn if you plan to stay in this benighted profession is that the chief enemy of culture in any school is always the Headmaster. Forgive Hector. He is trying to be the kind of teacher pupils will remember. Someone they will look back on. He impinges. Which is something one will never do.

Irwin But it's all about holding back. Not divulging. Something up their sleeve.

Mrs Lintott I wouldn't worry about that. Who's the best? Dakin?

Irwin He's the canniest.

Mrs Lintott And the best-looking.

Irwin Is he? I always have the impression he knows more than I do.

Mrs Lintott I'm sure he does.

In every respect. He's currently seeing (if that is the word) the Headmaster's secretary.

Irwin I didn't know that.

Mrs Lintott Which means he probably knows a good deal more than any of us. Not surprising, really.

Irwin No.

Mrs Lintott One ought to know these things.

Irwin Yes.

Mrs Lintott Posner knows, I'm sure.

Scripps About halfway through that term something happened. Felix in a bate, Hector summoned, Fiona relegated to the outer office.

Hector I am summoned to the Presence. The Headmaster wishes to see me, whose library books, we must always remember, Larkin himself must on occasion have stamped. 'After such knowledge, what forgiveness?'

Headmaster You teach behind locked doors.

Hector On occasion.

Headmaster Why is that?

Hector I don't want to be interrupted.

Headmaster Teaching?

Pause.

Hector I beg your pardon?

Headmaster I am very angry.

My wife, Mrs Armstrong, does voluntary work. One afternoon a week at the charity shop. Normally Mondays. Except this week she did Wednesday as well.

The charity shop is not busy.

She reads, naturally, but periodically she looks out of the window.

Are you following me?

The road. The traffic lights. And so on.

Pause.

On three occasions now she has seen a motorbike.

Boy on pillion.

A man . . . fiddling.

Yesterday she took the number.

For the moment I propose to say nothing about this, but fortunately it is not long before you are due to retire.

In the circumstances I propose we bring that forward.

I think we should be looking at the end of term.

Have you nothing to say?

Hector Ah.

Pornography.

No matter. We must carry on the fight without him.
What have we learned this week?

Posner 'Drummer Hodge', sir.
Hardy.

Hector Oh. Nice.

Posner says the poem off by heart

'They throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest
Uncoffined - just as found:

His landmark is a kopje-crest

That breaks the veldt around;

And foreign constellations west

Each night above his mound.

'Young Hodge the Drummer never knew -

Fresh from his Wessex home -

The meaning of the broad Karoo,

The Bush, the dusty loam,

And why uprose to nightly view

Strange stars amid the gloam.

'Yet portion of that unknown plain

Will Hodge for ever be;

His homely Northern breast and brain

Grow to some Southern tree,

And strange-eyed constellations reign

His stars eternally.'

Hector Good. Very good. Any thoughts?

Posner sits next to him.

Posner I wondered, sir, if this 'Portion of that unknown
plain / Will Hodge for ever be' is like Rupert Brooke, sir.

'There's some corner of a foreign field . . . 'In that rich
earth a richer dust concealed . . .'

Hector It is. It's the same thought . . . though
Hardy's is better, I think . . . more . . . more, well, down
to earth. Quite literally, yes, down to earth.

Anything about his name?

Posner Hodge?

Hector Mmm - the important thing is that he *has* a
name. Say Hardy is writing about the Zulu Wars or later
the Boer War possibly, these were the first campaigns
when soldiers . . . or common soldiers . . . were
commemorated, the names of the dead recorded and
inscribed on war memorials. Before this, soldiers . . .

private soldiers anyway, were all unknown soldiers, and
so far from being revered there was a firm in the nineteenth
century, in Yorkshire of course, which swept up their
bones from the battlefields of Europe in order to grind
them into fertiliser.

So, thrown into a common grave though he may be, he
is still Hodge the drummer. Lost boy though he is on the
other side of the world, he still has a name.

Posner How old was he?

Hector If he's a drummer he would be a young soldier,
younger than you probably.

Posner No. Hardy.

Hector Oh, how old was Hardy? When he wrote this,
about sixty. My age, I suppose.

Sad life, though not unappreciated.

'Uncoffined' is a typical Hardy usage.

A compound adjective, formed by putting 'un-' in
front of the noun. Or verb, of course.

Un-kissed. Un-rejoicing. Un-confessed. Un-embraced.

It's a turn of phrase he has bequeathed to Larkin, who
liked Hardy, apparently.

He does the same.

Un-spent. Un-fingermarked.

And with both of them it brings a sense of not sharing, of being out of it.

Whether because of diffidence or shyness, but a holding back. Not being in the swim. Can you see that?

Posner Yes, sir. I felt that a bit.

Hector The best moments in reading are when you come across something – a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things – which you had thought special and particular to you. Now here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met, someone even who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours.

He puts out his hand, and it seems for a moment as if Posner will take it, or even that Hector may put it on Posner's knee. But the moment passes.

Shall we just have the last verse again and I'll let you go.

Posner does the last verse again.

Dakin comes in.

And now, having thrown in Drummer Hodge, as found, here reporting for duty, helmet in hand, is young Lieutenant Dakin.

Dakin I'm sorry, sir.

Hector No, no. You were more gainfully employed, I'm sure.

Why the helmet?

Dakin My turn on the bike.

It's Wednesday, sir.

Hector Is it? So it is.

But no. Not today.

No. Today I go a different way.

'The words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo. You that way, we this way.'

Hector goes briskly off, leaving Dakin and Posner wondering.