

Dakin What you were saying about the perspective altering, sir . . .

The stuff we generally do with Mr Hector, the poetry, Shakespeare and all that, will the perspective alter on that?

Irwin Not now, no, probably not.

Scripps Better shelf-life than your stuff, then, sir.

Irwin That's the point. It's art. It has a different shelf-life altogether.

Dakin Never mind, coach. (*He pats him on the back.*) We still love you, even if you are a bit flash.

Irwin goes.

Scripps You flirt.

Dakin I don't understand it. I have never wanted to please anybody the way I do him, girls not excepted.

Scripps It's this making it up I can't get used to. Arguing for effect. Not believing what you're saying. That's not history. It's journalism.

Dakin Just wait till you get started on sex. You're making it up all the time. Being different, outrageous. That's what they go for. I tell you, history is fucking.

Scripps Discuss.

Anyway I'm not going to, am I? Not while God's still in the frame?

Dakin Hector's gone right off me.

Scripps Lucky you.

Dakin Thinks I've gone over to the enemy.

Scripps I did notice the lifts seem to have stopped.

Dakin No. That's something else.

He's going, you know.

Scripps The big man?

Dakin Don't let on. Fiona says.

Scripps Sacked? Who complained?

Dakin shrugs.

That's why the lifts have stopped.

Dakin Poor sod. Though in some ways I'm not sorry.

Scripps No. No more genital massage as one speeds along leafy suburban roads.

No more the bike's melancholy long withdrawing roar as he dropped you at the corner, your honour still intact.

Dakin Lecher though one is, or aspires to be, it occurs to me that the lot of woman cannot be easy, who must suffer such inexpert male fumbings virtually on a daily basis.

Are we scarred for life, do you think?

Scripps We must hope so.

Perhaps it will turn me into Proust.

Headmaster's study.

Headmaster A letter from the Posner parents. Charming couple. Jewish of course. Father a furrier, retired and, I suspect, elderly. Posner a . . . Benjamin is it . . .? A child of their old age.

Irwin He's clever.

Headmaster Jewish boys often are, a role though nowadays that is more and more being taken over by the

Asian boys, intelligence to some degree the fruit of discrimination.

It was apropos the Holocaust.

Irwin It came up in discussion.

Headmaster As it should. A shaping circumstance. A line drawn. Before and after.

However, Posner *père*, who seems a little overexcited, has taken some exception to your remarks that it should be kept in proportion.

Irwin I didn't quite say that.

Headmaster Mr Posner calls it 'a unique historical event' and says that it can't be compared with the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

Well, who in his right mind would think it could?

Irwin We did discuss how the Holocaust should be tackled in the event of them getting a question on it.

Headmaster Prefaced presumably with all the right disclaimers?

No suggestion above all that it didn't happen.

Irwin No, no . . . only the boys were asking.

Headmaster (*suddenly angry*) I'm not concerned with what the boys were asking. What concerns me is what you were telling them.

Irwin I was telling them that there were ways of discussing it that went beyond mere lamentation. The risk the historian . . .

Headmaster Mr Irwin. Fuck the historian.

I have two angry Jewish parents threatening to complain to the school governors. I have explained to them that you are young and inexperienced and that your anxiety that the boys should do well has perhaps outrun your sense of proportion.

You will write them a letter of apology on much the same lines.

They also complain that Hector has had the boy singing hymns.

Irwin Posner likes singing.

Headmaster Hymns?

Irwin Anything.

Headmaster Not . . . Gracie Fields?

Irwin Possibly.

Headmaster Didn't I suggest you grew a moustache?

Posner sings a verse of *Gracie Fields' 'Sing as We Go'.*

Irwin Do you tell them everything that goes on at school?

Posner He's old, my father. He's interested. I just said the Holocaust was a historical fact like other historical facts. It was my uncle who hit me.

Irwin I'm sorry. It was my fault. I was too . . .

dispassionate, I suppose. The Holocaust is not yet an abstract question. Though in time, of course, it will be.

Pause.

No more singing, too, I gather?

Posner Not hymns. They're fine with Barbra Streisand.

Pause.

Sir, sorry to keep on about it, but if the Holocaust does come up . . .

Irwin At home?

Posner No, as a question.

Irwin Surprise them. You're Jewish. You can get away with a lot more than the other candidates.

Equivalent would be Akthar singing the praises of empire.

But . . . say what you think.

Posner They don't send your papers home?

Dakin My duty to Your Lordship.

Irwin (*going*) Your essays, so called, are on the table.

Dakin I really enjoyed doing this one. And I'm beginning to get it. Turning facts on their head. It's like a game. (*He looks at his mark.*) Shit. He never gives an inch, does he? 'Lucid and up to a point compelling but if you reach a conclusion it escaped me.'

Scripps Have you looked at your handwriting recently?

Dakin Why?

Scripps You're beginning to write like him.

Dakin I'm not trying to, honestly.

Scripps You're writing like him, too.

Posner No, I'm not. Dakin writes like him. I write like Dakin.

Dakin It's done wonders for the sex life.

Apparently I talk about him so much Fiona gets really pissed off. Doing it is about the only time I shut up.

Scripps Would you do it with him?

Dakin I wondered about that. I might. Bring a little sunshine into his life. It's only a wank, after all.

Scripps What makes you think he'd do it with you?

Dakin smiles.

You complacent fuck.

Dakin Does the Archbishop of Canterbury know you talk like this?

Scripps So you broke through with Fiona. The Western Front.

Dakin Broke through. Had the Armistice. The Treaty of Versailles. It's now the Weimar Republic.

Scripps Decadence?

Dakin nods happily.

Posner Aren't you frightened it's all going to be over too soon?

Dakin What, sex?

Posner I mean, what have you got to look forward to?

Dakin More of the same. You can't save it up. I like him. I just wish I thought he liked me. (*He goes.*)

Posner Irwin does like him.

He seldom looks at anyone else.

Scripps How do you know?

Posner Because nor do I. Our eyes meet, looking at Dakin.

Scripps Oh Poz, with your spaniel heart, it will pass.

Posner Yes, it's only a phase.

Who says I want it to pass?

But the pain. The pain.

Scripps Hector would say it's the only education worth having.

Posner I just wish there were marks for it.

Hector, Irwin and Mrs Lintott are sitting behind the table, pretending to be the examination board.

Irwin Anything provocative in your papers and they may question you on that. Otherwise they are likely to be the usual, 'What are your hobbies?' type questions.

Mrs Lintott Mr Akthar. You say you're interested in architecture. Who is your favourite architect?

Akthar Richard Rogers.

Mrs Lintott I was thinking more along Wren-Hawksmoor lines. Richard Rogers? Doesn't he write musicals?

Akthar Oh, miss. It's a different one. You wouldn't get far, miss.

Mrs Lintott Nor will you. Next. Now, Mr Crowther. One of your interests is the theatre. Tell us about that.

Crowther I'm keen on acting. I've done various parts, favourite being . . .

Irwin Can I stop you?

Don't mention the theatre.

Crowther It's what I'm interested in.

Irwin Then soft pedal it, the acting side of it anyway.

Dons . . . most dons anyway . . . think the theatre is a waste of time. In their view any undergraduate keen on acting forfeits all hope of a good degree.

Hector So much for Shakespeare.

Irwin It's not the plays, it's the acting of the plays, Shakespeare, anybody. It's no fun teaching the stage-struck.

Hector And isn't being stage-struck part of their education?

Posner Music is all right though, isn't it, sir? They don't frown on that.

Hector No. You should just say what you enjoy.

Posner Mozart.

Irwin No, no. everyone likes Mozart.

Somebody more off the beaten track. Tippett, say, or Bruckner.

Posner But I don't know them.

Hector May I make a suggestion? Why can they not all just tell the truth?

Irwin It's worth trying, provided, of course, you can make it seem like you're telling the truth.

Hector Oh, yes, a degree of presentation.

Dorothy. Have you anything you'd like to add?

Mrs Lintott I hesitate to mention this, lest it occasion a sophisticated groan, but it may not have crossed your minds that one of the dons who interviews you may be a woman.

I'm reluctant at this stage in the game to expose you to new ideas, but having taught you all history on a strictly non-gender-orientated basis I just wonder whether it occurs to any of you how dispiriting this can be?

It's obviously dispiriting to you, Dakin, or you wouldn't be yawning.

Dakin Sorry, miss.

Mrs Lintott Women so seldom get a turn for a start, Elizabeth I less remarkable for her abilities than that, unlike most of her sisters, she did get a chance to exercise them.

Am I embarrassing you?

Timms A bit, miss.

Mrs Lintott Why?

Timms It's not our fault, miss. It's just the way it is.

Lockwood 'The world is everything that is the case,' miss. Wittgenstein, miss.

Mrs Lintott I know it's Wittgenstein, thank you. Tell me, just out of interest, did he travel on the other bus?

Hector Bus? Bus? What bus?

Irwin On the few occasions he went anywhere, yes, I believe he did.

Mrs Lintott You can tell.

Because 'The world is everything that is the case' seems actually rather a feminine approach to things: rueful, accepting, taking things as you find them.

A real man would be trickier: 'The world is everything that can be made to seem the case.'

However, je divague.

Can you, for a moment, imagine how dispiriting it is to teach five centuries of masculine ineptitude?

Why do you think there are no women historians on TV?

Timms No tits?

Hector Hit that boy. Hit him.

Timms Sir! You can't, sir.

Hector I'm not hitting you. He is. And besides, you're not supposed to say tits. Hit him again!

Mrs Lintott I'll tell you why there are no women historians on TV, it's because they don't get carried away for a start, and they don't come bouncing up to you with every new historical notion they've come up with . . . the bow-wow school of history.

History's not such a frolic for women as it is for men. Why should it be? They never get round the conference

table. In 1919, for instance, they just arranged the flowers then gracefully retired.

History is a commentary on the various and continuing incapacities of men.

What is history? History is women following behind with the bucket.

And I'm not asking you to espouse this point of view but the occasional nod in its direction can do you no harm.

There is a silence.

Mrs Lintott You should note, boys, that your masters find this undisguised expression of feeling distasteful, as, I see, do some of you.

Irwin Rudge?

Rudge is interviewed.

Mrs Lintott Now. How do you define history, Mr Rudge?

Rudge Can I speak freely, miss? Without being hit.

Mrs Lintott I will protect you.

Rudge How do I define history?

It's just one fucking thing after another.

Hector makes a move to hit him but is forestalled.

Mrs Lintott I see. And why do you want to come to Christ Church?

Rudge It's the one I thought I might get into.

Irwin No other reason?

Rudge shakes his head.

Mrs Lintott Do you like the architecture, for instance?

Rudge They'll ask me about sport, won't they?

Mrs Lintott If you're as uncommunicative as this they may be forced to.

Hector The point is, Rudge, that even if they want to take you on the basis of your prowess on the field you have to help them to pretend at least that there are other considerations.

Rudge thinks.

Rudge I'm keen on a film.

Irwin What film?

Rudge Well, lots of films, only Miss said to say film not films.

Mrs Lintott No, Rudge. What I said was that it sounds better to say 'I'm keen on film' rather than 'I like films'.

Irwin Like what?

Rudge thinks.

Lockwood Say, *This Sporting Life*.

Rudge shakes his head.

It's about rugger.

Rudge I'd like to see that. Is it recent?

Look, I'm shit at all this. Sorry.

If they like me and they want to take me they'll take me because I'm dull and ordinary. I'm no good in interviews but I've got enough chat to take me round the golf course and maybe there'll be someone on the board who wants to go round the golf course.

You think that's a joke, but golf makes the same sense to me as architecture or films do to you. You may not rate it but it's an accomplishment. I may not know much about Jean-Paul Sartre, but I've got a handicap of four.

Mrs Lintott Where have you heard about Sartre?

Rudge He was a good golfer.

Hector Really. I never knew that. Interesting.

Bell goes.

Irwin Remember also, our puny efforts notwithstanding, you will be up against boys and girls who will have been taught better than you.

Hector Taught differently, anyway.

Hector and Mrs Lintott go.

Lockwood How did you know Sartre was a golfer?

Rudge I don't know that he was. How could I? I don't even know who the fuck he is. Well, they keep telling us you have to lie.

Crowther I've a feeling Kafka was good at table tennis.

Akthar Yes?

Crowther I'll be glad when we can be shot of all this shit.

Dakin is left with Irwin.

Dakin Sir, I never gave you my essay.

Irwin That's good.

Dakin What degree did you get, sir?

You've never said.

Irwin A second.

Dakin Boring. Didn't the old magic work?

Irwin I hadn't perfected the technique.

Dakin What college were you at?

Irwin Corpus.

Dakin That's not one anybody is going in for.

Irwin No.

Dakin You happy?

Irwin There? Yes. Yes, I was, quite.

This is quite a pawsy conversation, with Dakin more master than pupil.

Dakin Do you think we'll be happy . . . say we get in?

Irwin You'll be happy anyway.

Dakin I'm not sure I like that. Why?

Irwin shrugs.

Uncomplicated, is that what you mean?

Outgoing?

Straight?

Irwin None of them bad things to be.

Dakin Depends. Nice to be a bit more complicated.

Irwin Or to be thought so.

How's Posner?

Dakin Why?

Irwin He likes you, doesn't he?

Dakin It's his age.
He's growing up.

Irwin Hard for him.

Dakin Boring for me.
You're not suggesting I do something about it. It happens.
I wouldn't anyway.
Too young.

Irwin says nothing.

You still look quite young.

Irwin That's because I am, I suppose.

There is an interminable pause.

Dakin How do you think history happens?

Irwin What?

Dakin How does stuff happen, do you think? People decide to do stuff.
Make moves. Alter things.

Irwin I'm not sure what you're talking about.

Dakin No? (*He smiles.*) Think about it.

Irwin Some do . . . make moves, I suppose.
Others react to events.
In 1939 Hitler made a move on Poland.
Poland . . .

Dakin . . . gave in.

Irwin (*simultaneously*) . . . defended itself.

Irwin Is that what you mean?

Dakin (*unperturbed*) No.
Not Poland anyway.
Was Poland taken by surprise?

Irwin To some extent.
Though they knew something was up.
What was your essay about?

Dakin Turning points.

Irwin Oh yes. Moments when history rattles over the points.
Shall I tell you what you've written?
Dunkirk?

Dakin Yes.

Irwin Hitler turning on Russia?

Dakin Yes.

Irwin Alamein?

Dakin Yes.

Irwin More? Oh, that's good.

Dakin Two actually.

The first one: when Chamberlain resigned as Prime Minister in 1940 Churchill wasn't the first thought; Halifax more generally acceptable.

But on the afternoon when the decision was taken Halifax chose to go to the dentist. If Halifax had had better teeth we might have lost the war.

Irwin Very good. Terrific.
And the other one?

Dakin Well, it is Alamein, but not the battle. Montgomery took over the Eighth Army before Alamein but he wasn't the first choice. Churchill had appointed General Gott. Gott was flying home to London in an unescorted plane when, purely by chance, a lost German fighter spotted his plane and shot him down. So it was Montgomery who took over, seeing this afterwards, of course, as the hand of God.

Irwin That's brilliant. First class.

Dakin It's a good game.

Irwin It's more than a game. Thinking about what might have happened alerts you to the consequences of what did.

Dakin It's subjunctive history.

Irwin Come again.

Dakin The subjunctive is the mood you use when something might or might not have happened, when it's imagined.

Hector is crazy about the subjunctive.
Why are you smiling?

Irwin Nothing. Good luck.

Boys and staff all come on as the boys arrange the chairs for a photograph.

Posner All my life I've been one of those squatting at the front. I don't care about Oxford and Cambridge. I'd just like to graduate to a chair.

Mrs Lintott moves up.

Mrs Lintott Posner, sit here. Rudge, you go down there.

She moves up and he sits on the front row.

Akthar Ready.

They are all ready for the picture when the Headmaster turns up.

Headmaster A photograph? Always a good idea.

Dorothy, sit here. Then I can go here. Posner, you'll be better on the floor.

Who's taking the picture?

Akthar It's delayed action.

Headmaster No, no. Too much hit-and-miss.

Hector, why don't you take it?

Mrs Lintott Then he won't be in the picture.

Headmaster Hector doesn't mind.

Mrs Lintott The boys might.

Headmaster It isn't for the boys. It's for the school. Rudge, floor, Akthar.

Now, boys. Look like Oxbridge material.
No negative thoughts. Threshold of great things.

Hector 'Magnificently unprepared
For the long littleness of life.'

*The boys do a farewell song and dance of Gracie Fields'
'Wish Me Luck as You Wave Me Goodbye', then go off,
leaving Irwin and Mrs Lintott waiting to see the
Headmaster. Very flat and empty.*

Irwin What's he want us for?

Mrs Lintott No idea.

Irwin Pep talk?

Mrs Lintott Bit late for that, it's probably about Hector.

Irwin I sort of know.

Mrs Lintott I imagine everyone sort of knows.

Irwin Does his wife?

Mrs Lintott He doesn't think so, apparently, but I imagine she's another one who's sort of known all along. A husband on a low light, that's what they want, these supposedly unsuspecting wives, the man's lukewarm attentions just what they married them for.

He's a fool. He was also unlucky.

For a start Mrs Headmaster didn't normally do a stint at Age Concern on a Wednesday unless someone was off. And what if a customer had come in just as Hector had got to the lights and she'd been looking the other way? Or the lights had been green? This smallest of incidents, the junction of a dizzying range of alternatives any one of which could have had a different outcome. If I was a bold

teacher . . . if I was you, even . . . I could spend a lesson dissecting what the Headmaster insists on calling 'this unfortunate incident' and it would teach the boys more about history and the utter randomness of things than . . . well, than I've ever managed to do so far.

Irwin I wonder how they're going on.

Mrs Lintott Don't you ever want to go back?

Irwin To Oxford? Not clever enough.

Not . . . anything enough really.

Pause.

I used to imagine myself doing research and coming up with something startling, a new way of looking at things. Like Namiet, say.

And I would do it, then fling it in their faces.

Mrs Lintott Oxford? Why should they care? No. They're like everybody else. Make money, that's what they admire. Make lots of money then don't give them any.

Headmaster comes out with Hector.

Headmaster Dorothy, a word?

They go back into the study.

Hector Trouble at t' mill.

That's the news he's aching to impart.

My . . . marching orders.

Irwin I sort of knew.

Hector Ah.

Irwin Dakin told me.

Hector Did he tell you why?

Irwin nods.

I've got this idea of buying a van, filling it with books and taking it round country markets . . . Shropshire, Herefordshire. The open road, the dusty highway. Travel, change, interest, excitement. Poop, poop?

Pause.

I didn't want to turn out boys who in later life had a deep love of literature, or who would talk in middle age of the lure of language and their love of words. Words said in that reverential way that is somehow Welsh. That's what the tosh is for. *Brief Encounter*, Gracie Fields, it's an antidote. Sheer calculated silliness.

Irwin Has a boy ever made you unhappy?

Hector They used to do.

See it as an inoculation, rather. Briefly painful but providing immunity for however long it takes. With the occasional booster . . . another face, a reminder of the pain . . . it can last you half a lifetime.

Irwin Love.

Hector Who could love me? I talk too much.

Irwin It took me by surprise.

Hector Don't do it.

Irwin I wouldn't dare.

Hector No. Don't teach.

Irwin I wasn't intending to.

Hector Who intends to?

Six months, a year. Till something more exciting turns up. It's always the same. I used to think I could warm myself on the vitality of the boys I taught, but that doesn't work.

It ought to renew . . . the young mind; warm, eager, trusting; instead comes . . . a kind of coarsening. You

start to clown. Plus a fatigue that passes for philosophy but is nearer to indifference.

Now boys come and go but I am no more moved by this than by the arrival and departure of trains. Boys have become work.

Irwin Do they know?

Hector They know everything.

Don't touch him. He'll think you're a fool. That's what they think about me.

I'm lucky, I suppose. Dodging the ignominy. Still, I'd have liked to have served my time.

Mrs Lintott comes out of the study.

I gather you knew, too.

Mrs Lintott smiles.

And the boys knew.

Mrs Lintott Well, of course the boys knew. They had it at first hand.

Hector I didn't actually do anything. It was a laying-on of hands, I don't deny that, but more in benediction than gratification or anything else.

Mrs Lintott Hector, darling, love you as I do, that is the most colossal balls.

Hector Is it?

Mrs Lintott A grope is a grope. It is not the Annunciation.

You . . . twerp.

Anyway what Felix wanted to tell me is that when I finish next year he's hoping he can persuade you to step into my shoes.

The Headmaster comes out.

Headmaster Irwin -