

Don't smile before Christmas

A short story by The Old Grey Owl



When he woke again in the middle of the night, he could still see them in the dim light that leaked into his room from the street lights outside. An irregular line of three separate piles on his desk, like a model of a row of tower blocks in shadows. All of the reading and handbooks and schemes of work he had immersed himself in during the summer holidays, ready for this moment. Normally the light didn't trouble him at all and he had the ability to sleep through earthquakes. The sleep of the just, as he always described it. The sleep of the unimaginative, Emma had always countered.

On a station platform in Naples, in a dubious Airbnb in Valencia, sticky with August heat, with a cock crowing outside the window, in a tent at Glastonbury, next to a couple he vaguely knew, having careful, but noisy sex, he had proved this ability many times in the years since A levels. But now, just when he really needed it, it had deserted him and he tossed and turned fitfully through the night, his mind churning with anxiety.

It had been made worse, the first time he had turned to see his books piled on the desk, when he caught, with a start, the figure of a man maintaining a still, brooding watch at the end of the bed. He froze, silently staring at the man, wondering whether he in turn could see his eyes watching back. His own breathing surged in his ears and his heart raced. He did not know how long this imagined staring match went on for, but for days afterwards he could taste the relief he experienced the second he realised the man was the clothes stand draped with his new suit, shirt and tie.

His mother had been insistent that this piece of kit from Ikea was essential to a successful working life. His flat was fully furnished and so the trip to Purley Way yielded only slim pickings. A few more additions to the extensive kitchen essentials she had overseen before his departure for University, a couple of prints, and a desk. The kitchen equipment was an indulgence, a fantasy. They both knew that Just Eat and Deliveroo furnished most of Ed's diet, but she wanted to believe that at some point her son would turn into that kind of young man who cooked vegetarian food for the entire house of artistic and creative friends. Ed was happy enough to go along with the fantasy for a quiet life and his mother didn't have the heart to challenge him, but secretly, she worried. How could young people afford takeaways four times a week? And why couldn't they see that it was horribly bad for them and the planet?

In the dusky warm September air in his room, wide awake now, he faced the prospect of morning, now only two hours away, with dread. He could probably manage the vegetarian food at some point. It was the friends bit that he would struggle with. He had accumulated a small group of close friends and a smattering, an outer circle of acquaintances, by the end of University. That had furnished him with a passable social life, people to bump into at the endless round of parties, to make trivial witty conversation with before the next equally meaningless event. A few brief encounters with women that added a frisson of excitement, but nothing that mattered. No spark, no connection, no engagement. Apart from Emma.

He had once tried to talk about these ideas, convinced that other people must surely feel them too, at the end of one drunken night sprawled in his shabby room, but the look on Gareth's face, a mixture of scorn and fear, told him not to go there, or anywhere near there, again. And so, most of his third year had been poisoned by a steadily growing sense of dread about what would happen when University was all over. If he couldn't make satisfactory connections in that setting, surrounded by hordes of attractive, intelligent, liberal people, what chance would he have in what was always strangely referred to as the real world? What would he do for a living? Where would he live? Who would he be?

It was that last question that troubled him the most. Who would he be? Everyone else seemed so certain. They knew who they were and what their place in the world was and would be in the future. That was clearly the reason that Gareth had given him that look. He was still no nearer to having the answer when, as his friends moved away to start their brilliant new lives, he found himself starting a teacher training course. He had toyed with the MA in film studies, which seemed to be the default position of everyone he knew, a way of extending the holiday from real life for another year. He had thought about a post- university gap year, travelling in the Far East, with a bit of worthy volunteering thrown in. They were all rejected as possibilities.

Well, not so much rejected, as that would suggest a positive decision of some sort. He didn't get round to doing anything about them and then the chance drifted away, thankfully, so yet again, a decision was avoided. And the year had flown by, with some sense of pleasure that not only had he passed his training course with flying colours, but that he was pretty good at it. And he enjoyed it. And, most curious of all, everyone seemed to be delighted that he was joining the school full time. He had the sense that he was regarded as something of a star. People stopped him on the corridor to chat with him. The endless reports that the training year had generated were full of glowing praise.

But still, at the back of his mind, a nagging doubt lurked. Sooner or later, he knew, he would get found out. There'd be embarrassment and apologies, anger and recriminations, regret and disappointment. And worse, until that happened, there was the inevitability of knuckling down to the grinding day-to-dayness of a proper job. All through the previous year of training he was able to pretend to himself that it wasn't really a proper job at all, just the latest in a long line of pretend jobs. But now he couldn't pretend any longer. It was a proper job, a career for God's sake, and, what's more, a career that was starting tomorrow. He stole a glance over the top of his duvet. The man and the mountain range were both still there, silently accusing him. He rolled over and tried once again to snatch some sleep.

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By the end of his first week as a Newly Qualified Teacher, he grabbed at the weekend like a drowning swimmer in sight of the shore who clings on to a piece of driftwood. His brain was boiling with the million names, and rules and procedures he was expected to know. He couldn't keep anything in his head for more than five minutes. He wrote down everything and then forgot what it was he had written down. He felt crushed under the weight of it.

And yet.... He was exhilarated by it all. The classroom was a felt like a crucible of creativity. He shut the door and then it was down to him to enthuse about language and literature. And after the

bureaucratic horror of his training year, when it seemed that he was required to record every single moment of the endeavour and, reflect upon it, evaluate its success, and adapt accordingly, he felt liberated by the light touch of accountability this induction year seemed to have. Yes, there were regular observations, but they never really bothered him. Perhaps he had been lucky and had found himself working in a school led by people who had a little bit more about them than some he had heard about. He had certainly heard horror stories from some of the other NQTs he met occasionally at the local network meetings. NQTs reduced to tears by bullying “mentors”. NQTs asked to cover for absent colleagues with classes that made the old lags in the staff room visibly blanch. NQTs sacked by the infamous Academy chain for failing two consecutive lesson observations.

And there were some quite nice people working in the school. Even the older ones. He found himself getting drawn into passionate discussions in the staffroom about the kids he taught. About the way he taught them and how, possibly, there were better ways of doing it. And these arguments led imperceptibly to discussions about politics and culture and football and music. It was – he hardly dared voice the thought – a little like the best of University, but without the drugs. Or, he thought ruefully, the capacity to miss that nine o’clock lecture on Marxist and feminist readings of Dickens. And, in some ways, it was better than University. They were paying him for his services. He wondered whether he was just experiencing a honeymoon period and if he was, when it would be over.

It didn’t take long for him to have his answer to that question.

8Y4.

When he thought about them, a cold wave of dread spread over his body and settled in his stomach like a dead weight. They had the capacity to ruin a weekend, to disrupt sleep, to make him fantasise about running away to stack shelves in Sainsbury’s for the rest of his life.

8Y4

In the beginning, in the first couple of weeks, they were one of his biggest success stories. They laughed at his jokes and responded well to the unit of work on genre, particularly the Sci-Fi horror stuff he started with. He was quite relaxed with them, a bit risqué at times, which set him apart from the experienced members of staff and that, plus his enthusiasm for the texts they were covering, was quite infectious. The class were doing things because they were interested in the work and because they liked him.

And then they stopped. A few lessons with a raised voice, a few sendings out, a lot of missed homeworks, and a poor set of grades and comments on the first substantial piece of written work, and everything drained away. They were like a jilted lover, withering in their scorn and implacable in their thirst for revenge. As the Indian summer gave its first hints of the impending Autumn, with flurries of brown leaves falling in the winds, and darker nights gathering around him like a shroud, his lessons with 8Y4 became ever more stressful.

Pathetic Fallacy, that’s what it was. He could make a little link in the lesson with that.

“Pathetic what, Sir?” This was the response from Gabriel Rimmon, a slight, wiry boy who had just begun to emerge from the mass in Ed’s mind. Increasingly, he had taken on the role of ring leader, but a subtle and sly ring leader who was hard to pin down and even harder to catch out. He had a distinctive pudding basin of white blond hair and piercing, sky blue eyes. He continued, his whining singsong voice cutting through the background chatter.

“You just made that up Sir, didn’t you? That’s not a thing, pathetic whatsit, is it?”

“Are you a real teacher, Sir?”

And then, in a lower voice, “I know what is pathetic, actually.”

Not one of his more successful ideas, that one. Perhaps not try anything new for a while.

His last lesson before the half term holiday was with 8Y4. Friday period 5 that week presented a heady cocktail, brimming with possibilities: He was virtually sleepwalking with exhaustion. They had the whiff of freedom in their nostrils. He had promised a DVD, if they finished their writing assessment practice. They sensed weakness and dashed off their written work in five minutes before setting up a continuous barrage of wheedling, outraged reminders of the promise. Ed’s attempts to regain control moved through reason, compromise, threat and bargaining, ending in unhinged, purple- faced, spittle- spraying ranting.

The class jeered at his loss of control and then they chanted, “DVD, DVD”, banging their tables in accompaniment. He looked around the room at this baying mob, his utter powerlessness growing with every sweep of the classroom, when his gaze rested on the classroom door. Just as he shifted his weight to make a move towards it, the door burst open and into the room strode Mr Chapman, the Deputy Head. He held the door open and glared around the room, his eyes raking across the mob. The class sprang to their feet, their scraping chairs heralding a silence almost painful in comparison to what had gone before.

Both the class and Ed had to endure a dressing down that was all the more frightening for being delivered in an icy, quiet voice that everyone had to strain to hear. It dripped sarcasm and intent. For all of its repeated phrases in praise of “Sir” (Did he even know his name?), Ed felt every line was a dagger to his self-esteem, and to his standing with the class. Proper teachers didn’t need this nannying. They didn’t need a baby-sitter. He longed for it to be over, but he knew that the minute Chapman had swept out of the room and Ed was left alone with them, their relief at his departure would completely trump their fear of his return, and the torment would begin again, but even worse this time. It had baffled him for some time now that senior staff, no matter how helpful and genuine they appeared to be in their efforts to help new teachers out, seemed to have no idea what they left behind them, having successfully “sorted out” an out of control classroom.

Chapman, however, was well aware of this possibility. He stayed and stalked the aisles of the classroom while the class duly completed their piece of writing. “Properly this time, gentlemen,” he intoned threateningly, as his leather brogues creaked their way up and down the rows of tables. Ed was left like a spare part at his desk at the front, a frozen expression on his face that he tried his best to make a complete amalgam of professional surveillance, moral outrage, and academic rigour, all leavened with a hint of pastoral concern. Occasionally, when a member the class looked up from their labours to surreptitiously check the clock on the classroom wall, they were struck by Ed’s face, which appeared to them to be of someone suffering from a terminal illness, or at the very least constipation.

At the back of the class, a picture of contrite obedience, was Gabriel Rimmon, hunched over his writing, seemingly desperate to make amends for his errant behaviour. Every time Chapman turned on his peregrinations around the room to stroll back to the front, turning his back to Gabriel, Rimmon looked up from his work and stared at Ed. The expression on his face was one of cold, amused contempt and his ice blue eyes seemed to glow in their intensity. Once, Ed caught his stare

and returned it, expecting the boy to put his head back down to his work and avoid further trouble, but instead he held Ed's stare and narrowed his eyes. Ed, lost in his own thoughts about the humiliation of having to have the Deputy Head as a minder, had just registered this strange, challenging staring contest when Chapman turned again and Gabriel went back to his work.

Later in the pub, having endured a pep talk from Mr Chapman, he was deep into his second pint, wondering whether to call it a day, or to gird his loins for the traditional end of term jolly. This always moved the participants from the pub, to the restaurant and for the hardy few, clubbing and the prospect of the mother of all hangovers. He had experienced a couple of these events during his training year, and had been struck by how different groups of staff fell by the wayside as the evening progressed, a process akin to refining oil. By the end, only the purest party animals were left, most single, some fantasists, all heroically drunk. Maybe he'd give it a miss this time.

"So, did Chappers give you a bollocking then?"

He looked up from his calculations. It was Jim Stevens, the elder statesman of the English Department. Before Ed could reply, Jim deposited his pint on the spare beer mat next to Ed, and swung himself round into the vacant seat. Ed braced himself for what was clearly going to follow – some homespun wisdom from the Sage of South London. He looked up and saw Pratik and Holly coming back from the bar with their drinks, and as they realised that Jim had slipped into their seats they rolled their eyes at Ed, and sniggering to each other, hung a sharp left to find another table.

"Sorry, what was that, Jim?"

"Chappers. Did he give you a bollocking? Y'know, after that car crash, period 5 with Year 8?"

"Oh God, does everybody know about that? That's all I need."

"Course they do lad, you could hear it all the way down the corridor. Well, did he?"

"Wasn't too bad I suppose. He was quite encouraging in a way."

"Aye, he's not bad as far as Senior Management go."

This was high praise from Jim, who reserved his bitterest scorn for "Leadership". He had been teaching for centuries, all at the same school and had seen many initiatives come and go, some more than once. There were rumours, though Ed could scarcely believe them, that Jim had started as an English teacher before The National Curriculum. This seemed to Ed to be as far distant as the Jurassic era, and about as relevant. As well as being a professional cynic and curmudgeon, he was also a professional northerner, his flat Yorkshire vowels seemingly untouched by thirty five years as a self-professed missionary to the heathens in the soft underbelly of the South East. This too was all part of the act. Underneath his well-crafted facade of cynicism, however, was someone who loved being an English teacher, and who, many geological eras later, was still inspirational. When he closed the classroom door, the hardest, the most damaged kids in the school lapped up his lessons and flourished in the fertile soil of language and literature he provided.

He was one of those teachers who made newly qualified staff despair. He was so far ahead of them in his teaching that they couldn't conceive of ever being good enough. Ed, however, had a bit of a soft spot for him. Jim had been very kind to him since September and his occasional, easy words of encouragement made a big difference when a day was going badly.

“The thing is, Jim, is that 8Y4 have really got me over a barrel. All my other classes are going pretty well, but I start to worry about teaching 8Y4 the day before my lessons with them. It’s starting to affect my confidence. To be honest, I’m not sure whether I’m cut out for this job, you know.”

Jim put his pint down.

“Eh, none of that, none of that. Listen to me Edward, lad. Listen. If people like you stop being a teacher then we’re all stuffed, because you’re a natural, lad, a natural. You’ve just made the classic mistake, that’s all.”

“What mistake?”

“That 8Y4 are bloody difficult. Everyone says so. There’s summat not quite right about them. I don’t know what it is, but there’s a coldness and a sourness about them. And you were too bloody nice to ‘em at the beginning. They think you’re a soft touch. When you start, you’ve got to be a right hard-faced so -and -so with your classes.”

“But that’s not me Jim, I couldn’t possibly do that.”

“Course it’s not you, you muppet. If it was really you, you’d have no future in teaching. Apart from ending up being some bastard, zero tolerance Headteacher. Yer acting lad, acting. And you need a bloody Oscar winning performance to get them back. This is what you do. When we come back, after half term, you don’t smile at all. Don’t smile before Christmas, that’s the rule. Don’t give ‘em an inch. Bring everybody in to back you up and use the systems relentlessly. Detentions, letters home, reports, all of it. And then, in the Spring, gradually, very gradually, when they’re doing what you want, you ease off a little. And then, when the light nights come round again in April and May, that’s when you can start to smile. Then they’ll realise that you love ‘em, and they’ll love yer back.”

Ed looked doubtful.

“Are you sure about this Jim? Don’t smile before Christmas?”

“Trust me lad. It’s a bloody war out there. A man must walk down these mean streets and survive, eh, Edward? Gloria Gaynor had it about right. ‘I will survive.’ Except she never had to take bloody 8Y4 last lesson on a wet Friday afternoon at Longdon High School.”

Ed took another swig of his beer and shook his head. He wanted to believe, he really did, but at that precise moment it just seemed a little unlikely. Jim got to his feet, patted him on the shoulder and reached for his glass.

“Cheer up lad, for God’s sake. You’ve got a week off and they’re even paying you for the pleasure. And remember what I said, it’s a war out there. Think on.”

And then he was gone, slipping through the crowded bar to the door.

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By and large, it worked. He carried on in the same vein with the rest of his classes, while slipping into his new stony-faced persona with 8Y4. In the very first lesson after the half term holiday, there was a flicker of resistance, led of course by the hateful Gabriel Rimmon, but when the full might of Senior Leadership was rolled on to their lawns, he and the rest of the class appeared to recognise that resistance was futile. With an unspoken sign to the others, a look, a raised eyebrow, they knuckled under and submitted to Ed’s harsh regime.

But what should have heralded relief and self-congratulation instead provoked a new kind of anxiety. His lessons with 8Y4 immediately settled into a pattern of sullen silence. No questions were ever asked. No answers to Ed's questions were ever given, save, "I don't know Sir" or "I'm sorry, I'm not sure, Sir." He felt like the brutal overseer on a slave plantation, faced with forced compliance and averted eyes. And in every lesson, at some point, he would look up and see Gabriel staring at him from the back row, his face fixed and expressionless. He'd wait until he caught Ed's eye, hold the stare for thirty seconds and then look back down at his work.

He didn't tell anyone about this new turn of events. The silence that seeped into the corridor outside his room confirmed for everyone the success of Ed's new approach and he received congratulations and quiet words of encouragement from his colleagues. Jim winked at him and patted him on the back as they passed. "Told you, didn't I? Well done lad, well done," he said quietly.

He didn't have the heart to tell anyone about his worries. And what was he worried about exactly? What would he actually say to anyone? "My lessons with 8Y4 are a nightmare. They're just too quiet." Everyone would think he was just showing off. He came close after one particularly disturbing incident in early December. It was the same lesson again, last period on Friday afternoon, cold and raw, with the yellow classroom lights blazing out into the dark winter sky.

The class were queueing outside the room when Ed arrived. Normally, this would require at least thirty seconds of imposing order before letting them in, their wait for the teacher having generated scuffles and shouts, but on this occasion, Ed was astonished to turn the corner and find them queueing in a perfect straight line in silence. At the head of the line was Gabriel, smirking.

He unlocked the classroom door and ushered them in with some words of praise. "Come in quietly please Year 8. Excellent, orderly queueing by the way. Well done."

He stood in the doorway and the students passed him one at a time. Gabriel, the first to enter, looked up at him as he passed and his face broke into a radiant smile that lasted for a fraction of a second before his features reassembled themselves into their customary blank mask of passive aggression. Every other student did exactly the same thing, beaming a brief flicker of a smile before taking up their position standing behind their chairs.

"Ok, good afternoon Year 8. Sit down please and get your equipment out."

No-one moved. Ed's eyes flicked around the room.

"Can you sit down please? Books, pens and planners out as usual."

Again, they did not stir. Then Gabriel, on the back row by the aisle, stepped sideways so that he was alone at the back between the two ranks of tables, staring out to the front. Ed licked his lips nervously and twiddled his board pen. Everyone else remained in their positions staring impassively forward. The silence in the room grew oppressive. Ed shook himself and was about to raise his voice and demand that they sit down when Gabriel suddenly smiled a broad, open smile, the overhead strip lighting flashing on the enamel of his teeth. The lighting suddenly dimmed as if there had been a power surge and his eyes seemed to go blank. In the gloom, they appeared to glow an icy blue. All of the other students, still standing like statues in their ranks, all broke into the same smile in unison, and their eyes too took on an awful, blue blankness.

Ed's legs begin to tremble, and he felt a wave of pressure in the air, the silence and the smiles all pressing down on him. He felt for the edge of his desk and managed to lower himself into his seat before his legs gave way. Immediately, all of the children sat down in silence and began to fumble in

their bags for their equipment. And almost as soon as it began, it was over. Ed carried on with his lesson as normal and could not remember anything that had happened, save for a non-specific sense of foreboding and a nagging worry at the back of his mind that something strange had just occurred, but the needs of the lesson overtook him and he put it to the back of his mind.

And that would have been the end of it, except that when everyone had left, whooping down the corridor ready for the weekend, Ed, as always, scoured the classroom clearing books and sheets of paper that had been abandoned on tables. When he got to the back of the room, he stopped at Gabriel's table. There, in black biro on the desk, was a scrawled message that read simply, "Don't smile until Christmas". He stared at it, open mouthed.

The next week, when he challenged Gabriel about it, he simply said, "Oh, yes Sir, that was there at the beginning of the lesson. I told you about it but you never answered."

Ed mumbled something in reply and swiftly moved the conversation on, but the doubts remained, eating away at him. By the time they had got to the penultimate week before Christmas, he had managed to almost forget his unease. 8Y4 had continued their campaign of grumpy resistance but without giving any concrete reason to complain. His thoughts turned to the Christmas holiday, an unbearably delicious prospect of sleeping in, and time to himself. His flatmates, annoyingly well-paid corporate lawyers, had already left for two weeks of sun in Barbados and his mother, after much reassurance from Ed, was going to spend Christmas in Singapore with Frank, a man she had met on a Saga cruise back in March.

"The thing is Edward, Frank is very nice. I really rather like him, but I don't like to think of you being on your own at Christmas," she had said during one of his weekend trips back home.

Ed had rolled his eyes. "Mum, I'll be fine, honestly. You go and enjoy yourself. I'm planning to spend Christmas with Emma."

Her eyes narrowed. "Emma? I didn't know all that was back on. Are you sure Edward, after what happened last time?"

"Nothing's back on Mum, it's not even fully sorted out yet. I'll be fine whatever happens with Emma."

But he hadn't quite sorted it with Emma. His first few attempts at meeting up again over Christmas were received coolly, so he filed it away in the back of his mind as something to deal with as soon as this mad, exhausting first term was over. There was just one final ordeal to get through before he could begin to relax. His last proper lesson with 8Y4 this Friday afternoon and he had warned them repeatedly that they were going to do another exam conditions assessment. They received this news with the same blank insolence as they did everything else, having maintained their campaign of icy silence right to the death.

He had thought of caving in for a quiet life, but when he sought out Jim for some advice, he was unequivocal.

"No, don't do that Ed. It's absolutely essential that you see this through to the bitter end. You can't afford to show any weakness now, not after you've held out for so long. Believe me, it would be disastrous. In January, that's when you can lighten up a bit."

And so, he girded his loins for another sixty minutes of the waves of personal hatred that would emanate from the rows in front of him. At one point in the lesson, the door opened and Mr Chapman slid into the room. He stood in the doorway and noted with quiet approval the immaculate

working atmosphere of the class. So engaged in their work were they that no-one looked up from their writing to see who the new arrival was. Chapman looked across at Ed, smiled and put his thumbs up, before backing out of the door and closing it carefully with a soft click. Gabriel looked up at the door at that moment and smiled his blank, ice blue smile. On cue, everyone else in the room did exactly the same and for a split second all thirty students were beaming at the closed door. There was a sudden flicker of the lighting and then they all turned back to their work, as the lights reasserted themselves. A shiver went down Ed's spine.

A couple of minutes from the end, Ed announced to the class, his voice sounding unfamiliar as it broke the blanket of silence that lay over them all, "Ok, Year 8, stop writing now please. Make sure you have put your name, the title and today's date and underlined all three of those things. Have your papers on the side of the table ready to collect. Gabriel, can you go round and collect them in please?"

Gabriel stared at him, unblinking. Ed, tired of all of this now, irritated that even now in this final minute, this ridiculous charade of a challenge was still present in the room, raised his voice, his anger and impatience finally breaking through.

"Gabriel, for God's sake, will you just do as you're told straight away without these unpleasant theatrics. Collect the papers in please, quick as you can."

Gabriel stood up and moved into the aisle, his face as blank as a September exercise book. He began to walk down the aisle towards Ed. With every step he took, the rest of the class gently, but in perfect unison, banged their tables. Ed looked around, furious. He screamed at them, "Now that's enough. Stop that at once. Silence!"

The banging stopped immediately. They all stood up from their seats in perfect unison and began to file out from the rows, filling in the aisle behind Gabriel, all walking in step, each one with a terrifying, fixed smile on his face. The lights dimmed and thirty pairs of blue glowing eyes stared unblinking at him. Ed stuttered, dry-mouthed, "What.. what are you doing?....." He looked at the door and took a step towards it reaching for the handle. He turned it, but to his surprise it was locked. He rattled at it, in a panic. Letting go of the handle, he stepped back into the centre of the room, where he was confronted by the steadily advancing army of silent, staring, smiling students. His next step was backwards as they continued, pace by pace, until he had backed against the wall and could go no further and they pressed against him. Suddenly, from the corridor he heard the familiar click of a pair shoes striding down the corridor. He tried to call out but no voice came.

Outside the room, walking down the corridor, infused with Christmas cheer and goodwill to all men was Jim. Just another couple of days to survive next week and then came the blessed relief of the holiday. Even after thirty-five years he hadn't tired of the rush that that prospect brought with it. He thought he'd look in on Ed and just check all was well. His strategy for 8Y4 seemed to have worked pretty well. Certainly there was never any shouting or disturbance from his classroom when they were in there with him these days and Ed seemed to think there had been some improvement. But still Jim worried about him. He often seemed tense and distracted and it had been a long while since Jim had seen him laugh. He stopped outside the classroom door and shook his head. "Stop worrying over nothing. The lad just needs a holiday, like the rest of us. He'll be right as rain when he comes back in January," he thought, a wry smile on his face.

He opened the door and popped his head inside. The room was empty.

"Blimey, he got away quickly. Must have something on tonight, the young rascal."

He stepped inside and saw that on the teacher's desk was a neat pile of exam papers, and on top of that was a pale blue business card. He reached over and picked it up. It was Ed's, his hesitant, half smile was flanked by all of his details: email address, mobile number and school details. This had been a recent initiative from the school, a fake business model accessory that drew withering scorn from Jim when it had been first introduced. He popped it in his pocket for safe keeping.

"He doesn't want to leave this lying around so some kid can ruin his Christmas for a laugh," he thought, closing the door behind him.

Inside the room, there was a flicker of the lights and a creaking of the walls in the December wind that moaned outside.

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It was the end of January when they finally managed to find Ed's replacement. A newly qualified teacher who hadn't found a job last September happened to be available. Both she and the school were delighted, although there were some concerns. Mr Chapman, who had interviewed her thought her a little timid and was worried that she would find it all a bit too much, but beggars couldn't be choosers and they would just have to do their best.

Anna started on a Friday and found herself sitting in the English Department office with Jim just before her last lesson of the day. It had been a bit of a whirlwind, but everything had gone pretty well, and she was feeling that she might be able to settle down here. At least everyone seemed friendly, even Senior Management, and that had not been her experience in the schools she had done teaching practice in.

"So, I still haven't quite worked out why there was this sudden vacancy. There's nothing I should know is there? I'm not walking into to some horrible situation."

Jim sipped his coffee. "No, nothing like that, er, Anna, was it? No, a bit of a sad story actually."

Anna looked concerned.

"Oh yes, why was that then?"

"Oh, Ed, the lad was teaching here before you, he was an NQT as well. He was very good, a bit of a natural actually. We all thought everything was fine. And then, out of the blue, in the last week before Christmas he didn't come in. He sent an email saying he'd decided that teaching wasn't for him, that he wanted to go travelling or whatever it is you young people do these days. He was very apologetic and grateful and all of that but that was that, we never saw him again."

"Oh no, that's terrible." She was a little more concerned to hear that her predecessor had been a "natural" and "very good". Suddenly, all of the old doubts crowded in on her again.

"Aye, it was terrible. And that wasn't the only thing. We heard later that his mother died in the holidays. Run over by a cab in the street. In Singapore. Tragic, really."

Jim subsided into a gloomy silence while Anna awkwardly drank her coffee. Finally, he roused himself from his thoughts.

“Any way, that’s enough of that. Now then, you’ve got 8Y4 next lesson. They’re a little bit awkward, but nothing to worry about. I’ll give you the same advice that I gave Ed. Go in hard and whatever you do, don’t smile before Christmas. Or in your case, July.”

A look of terror flashed across her face.

“Now then Anna don’t worry yourself. Chappers will take you in and give ‘em the evil eye and I can pop in and check everything is ok. You’ll be fine, trust me”

And so, Anna eventually found herself at the front of the room facing 8Y4. Mr Chapman had indeed introduced her as their new teacher and had somehow put the fear of god into them with a raised eyebrow and an icy voice. The class sat in silence, blond and angelic, with perfect uniform and equipment, staring up at her in expectation. They stayed like that even after Chapman had closed the door behind him.

Anna started to explain her expectations and what they were going to cover that term. Her voice, faltering at first, grew stronger and clearer as her confidence increased. This was the longest time she had been able to speak to a class without interruption. She reached a pause and moved on her PowerPoint slide. A hand went up from a student on the back row. She looked up.

“Yes? I’m sorry, I don’t know your name.”

“It’s Gabriel, Miss.”

“Well, Gabriel, what can I do for you?”

“Sorry Miss, what was your name again?”

“Miss Kowalski.”

She turned to the board and wrote out her name.

“And, are you going to be our teacher for the rest of the year?”

“Yes, I am Gabriel. We’re going to be learning such a lot this year.”

“Wicked. I’m sure you’re going to be better than the last one. He was hopeless.”

Anna frowned. She felt uncomfortable about being drawn into this kind of criticism.

“Well,” she began, “I’m not sure that...”

Gabriel suddenly broke into a dazzling smile and, all around him, the rest of the class looked up at Anna and their faces too were wreathed in beaming smiles. All except the boy sitting next to Gabriel, his white blond head bowed. The smiles stopped and the boy, his face now raised, pale as raw sausages, put his hand up.

Gabriel shouted out by way of explanation, “He’s new, Miss.”

“Don’t shout out, Gabriel, please. Now, young man, what’s your name?”

He blinked and looked puzzled, as if he wasn’t sure.

“Your name?” Anna repeated, patiently.

“Edward, Miss. My name is Edward,” he croaked, his voice seeming to come free from some invisible moorings somewhere.

He opened his mouth again to speak. There was silence and everyone waited. A bead of sweat appeared on Anna's forehead. The silence pressed down on them all until his words were finally formed and released.

"I'm so pleased you're here. We're going to have so much fun, now."

And he smiled.

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