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‘It’s just one afternoon, Clive.’

‘Is it, though? It always ends up being a whole day.’

‘Yes, but a fun day.’

‘But will it be fun?’

‘Clive, if you approach it as a fun day, then it will be a fun day.’

Iain Dixon was fifty years of age, tall and whippet thin, with thick grey hair and a noticeable lack of concern for the views of others. He was childless, often single, and had taught art and design at the same unremarkable private school for a quarter of a century. Why it was felt by the powers that be that this would make him a suitable person to take on the role of careers officer was something that was never adequately explained. But nevertheless, one afternoon a week he would sit behind the desk in the school’s small careers office and languidly describe to the teenagers sitting opposite him the narrow courses that their lives would follow, and the paths of least resistance that would take them there. If his views were ever challenged, Dixon would simply look back at them with a serene expression and say, ‘It is, of course, all *entirely* up to you.’

It was this very same facial expression, almost as much as the man’s envious build, that was currently infuriating Clive Hapgood. Clive was only thirty-eight years old, but a stone heavier than he had been a decade ago, and had hair that, though still just about more brown than it was grey, was somehow neither as thick nor as curly as it used to be. Of the many things that gnawed away at Clive like Highland ticks,

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the most pressing was how to stop this smirking, disingenuous fool from persuading him to play for the staff cricket team this Sunday.

‘Iain, can I think about it? I’d have to make a few calls. I’m not sure I’m free.’

‘I’ll put you down as a probable.’

‘I really don’t think Helen will like it.’

‘Tell her to come. Bring the children. It’ll be fun.’

Clive and Helen had been married for twelve years, and they had two daughters: Sarah, eleven, and Katie, eight. They lived in a mid-terrace house not far from his place of work, and too many of his history students walked past on their way to and from school for him to ever feel truly at ease. Once a group of fifteen-year-olds walked by as he was dropping a clutch of empty wine bottles into the rubbish bin next to his front step and they laughed at him. Another time he had heard boys laughing and joking outside his front door, and when he went outside, he found that his scrappy, narrow front garden had been decorated with pages from a pornographic magazine. Those, too, went into the rubbish bin. He thought he recognised the miscreants’ voices, but what was the point of pursuing the matter? It would only be more fuss.

‘Iain, I’m not sure that a Sunday is really the best day for my family. It’s our one chance to be together.’

‘Well, can’t you be together at the cricket? We won’t start until twelve. You’ve most of the morning free to wash the car or read the papers. You could grab breakfast somewhere?’

‘I grab breakfast in my own kitchen. And I don’t spend Sundays washing my car, Iain. And I barely have *time* to read the Sunday papers, let alone turn out for your—’

‘It is, of course, *entirely* up to you.’

The staffroom was filling up now. Perhaps Iain could turn his attentions elsewhere and leave Clive to drink coffee.

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The jug sitting on the hot plate under the filter machine was already half empty, he saw, and there was a queue forming.

‘Anyway,’ said Iain, ‘you look like you’re anxious to get your morning coffee, Clive. You’re down as a probable.’

Clive gave what he hoped was a non-committal smile and set off in the direction of the coffee machine and his head of department, Robert Icke, who was at the back of the queue. Icke’s latest crime was to clamp down on the amount of use his department members made of the photocopier. Clive was about to tap him on the shoulder and discuss the matter when someone at the front of the queue gave an almighty howl.

‘Oh Jesus Christ! Bloody hell!’

The queue broke up and Clive could see the figure of Wally Davis, bent double and sucking on two of his fingers while jumping up and down. Those who had been in the queue, Icke among them, took this opportunity to push past and get to the coffee while Wally, his face reddening, clamped his eyes shut and tilted back his head. Clive put a hand on Wally’s shoulder.

‘OK, Wally?’ he asked.

‘Jesus, that was hot.’

‘Let’s get you away.’

Clive helped Wally up to his full height of five foot three and walked him over to a wooden armchair in the corner. Wally, perhaps to compensate for his unimposing height, always wore jackets made from an incredibly heavy tweed that added considerably to his girth and restricted his movements, with the result that he struggled to sit back all the way into the chair, and instead had to perch on its front edge in the manner of a self-conscious Humpty Dumpty. The jackets also meant that Wally was always too hot, whatever the weather, and permanently marked with perspiration. He wiped at his forehead with a cuff and looked sadly around.

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‘Why do people have to jostle like that? Of course I’m going to spill hot coffee on myself if people are rubbing up against me. I’ve always thought someone might get seriously hurt. It would be me, wouldn’t it?’

The first two fingers of Wally’s right hand were dark red and mottled with white lumps, and appeared to be swelling even as Clive watched. He would need medical attention, although the school nurse’s brusque bedside manner would only break Wally’s morale further. In any case, the low urgency with which she offered medical help hardly qualified her as an emergency service. Wally himself seemed less concerned about the physical aspects of his injury than the behaviour of his colleagues.

‘It’s unseemly. Don’t you think?’

‘Yes,’ said Clive. ‘But then, it’s always been like this, hasn’t it?’

‘Doesn’t make it right.’

‘Why don’t I get something for your hand?’

Clive shuffled over to the sink, under which he vaguely recalled once seeing some Savlon and plasters. He got down on all fours to open up the cupboard, but as he did so several bottles of cleaning fluid tumbled out, bringing with them a profusion of browning J-cloths and an assortment of parched washing-up sponges. Removing an ageing, perished plunger, he saw a red box behind the U-bend that could be a first-aid kit, and so also took out two old Jif bottles and a wooden box of shoe polish. The U-bend was quite tight against the back of the cupboard, and so Clive had to reach as far as he could just to lay his fingers on the box. Then, to get sufficient purchase on it, he had to lower his shoulders and roll onto his side so that he could hook his arm around the back. He could now get a decent grip on the box but was unable to pull it towards him, so he tried instead to punch the box through the gap to collect it from the other side. His third

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punch saw some success, at which point he heard a voice say, 'Everything all right, Clive? This all seems rather desperate.'

The remark, made by Frampton's headmaster, was intended to be jovial. Clive paused to glance over his shoulder and saw that he was looking up at Julian Crouch's pinstriped trousers. His moustached but otherwise Roman-looking face was the best part of six feet away.

'Hello, Headmaster,' said Clive.

'You look as if you're trying to burrow your way out. Things can't be that bad, can they?'

Clive chuckled politely and then continued trying to push the first-aid box through.

'I'm just trying to get a first-aid kit. Wally Davis has burnt himself,' he explained as the box finally came loose. He poked his arm around to the other side and then stood up, holding the first-aid box triumphantly.

'Well done, Clive. You've left yourself with rather a lot of tidying up to do, of course.'

Clive surveyed the cupboard's useless contents, now arranged at his feet. There was a bar of green Fairy soap that must have been older than he was. Clearly it all belonged in a bin but Clive, like everyone else before him, was just going to shove it all back in and shut the doors.

'Everything else going smoothly, Clive?'

'Well, the lower sixth are . . .'

'Excitable?'

'Tiring.'

The headmaster gave Clive an admonishing look. Like everything that the headmaster said or did, he intended this to be taken humorously, though it was meant entirely literally.

'Tiring? For a young man like you? You're supposed to be dynamic. You seem happy enough rolling about on the floor of the staffroom.'

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The head laughed and Clive did his best to join in, despite always finding their interactions as bothersome as they were chilling.

The headmaster's laughter ended as abruptly as it had begun, and the possessor of the school's most perennially straight back strode off towards the coffee machine. Clive shoved the various crumbling cleaning materials back in the cupboard, then opened the box and found it empty.

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'No plasters or anything, I'm afraid. But I thought it might help if you lowered your fingers into this.'

Clive passed a glass of water to Wally and sat in the next armchair along. He was never quite sure if the chairs were coffee-coloured by design or through years of hot spills. Wally tried to force his fist into the glass, but his hands and fingers, much like the rest of him, were stubby and didn't fit in. He gave up and instead sipped the tepid water.

'Do you think someone might make another pot of coffee?' Wally asked.

'Robert looks like he's having a go.'

Robert Icke had fitted a new filter into the machine and was now very slowly and deliberately filling it in accordance with the handwritten instructions affixed to the side. He then took great care as he transferred the old filter towards the bin to ensure that no coffee seeped onto his crisply ironed short-sleeved shirt. He always wore a short-sleeved shirt, something Helen had once told Clive she found annoying. Clive was more irritated by the way Icke whistled, and the irksome waft of his scented moisturiser.

Wally gave a little lop-sided smile. 'He's another one.'

'Robert?'

'Never speaks to me. Worse than the head.'

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‘I’d happily never have to speak to either of them. Still, at least Icke knows something about teaching, which is more than you can say about Crouch.’

‘He can’t have taught a lesson for years, can he? He’s basically an administrator.’

‘He’s a sort of meeter-and-greeter, really. Likes the formal wear. Handing out prizes at the end of the year. I saw him showing some parents around in the quad yesterday; he was being unbelievably suave. He pointed me out to them and said, “Young Clive there is scurrying off to teach the historians of tomorrow.” Sick-making.’

‘I hate suave people,’ said Wally sadly as he looked down at his blistering fingers. ‘Oh God.’

‘Why don’t I get us both a coffee?’ said Clive. But just as he stood up, Crouch began to strike the side of his cup with a teaspoon. Everyone fell silent as the headmaster strode into the middle of the room. Clive lowered himself back onto the arm of his chair.

‘Thank you, everyone. I don’t want to keep you from your morning coffees for long. There are only a couple of things I have to say.’ As he spoke, he turned expansively from side to side so as to take in all corners of the room and to connect with his entire audience of around fifty or so.

‘The first thing I wish to do is to introduce to you all to Flora Wilson. Where are you, Flora?’

A tall, slim woman with dark hair took a step forward from a group huddled by the noticeboards and gave a cheery, confident wave. Early forties, Clive reckoned.

‘Thank you, Flora. There she is. Miss Wilson is here for a few weeks to observe us for the last . . .’ He searched for a suitable word for a moment, and having found it, made full use of its plosive possibilities, ‘. . . for the last *portion* of this summer term, before joining the Frampton staff *permanently* in the autumn as part of our excellent history department.’

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Wally flashed a quizzical look and Clive shot back a look of complete innocence. Who was leaving?

‘I’m sure that you can all be relied upon to be as charming and helpful as ever, but *please* do all that you can to make her feel as welcome as is humanly *possible*.’

As each plosive struck Clive’s inner ears with full force, he was reminded of last night’s drinking. Four glasses of red wine. Not a heavy session, but ill-disciplined for a Wednesday night. *Portion. Permanently. Please. Possible.* Still two left in the chamber.

‘If you see her wandering the corridors looking lost, do set her on the right *path*.’

As the last word of Crouch’s most recent utterance ricocheted around the room, Clive wondered why nobody had told him that there was going to be a new member of staff in his department.

‘The other thing I have to do is remind you that our staff cricket side – so capably and enthusiastically run by Mr Dixon – have a match this Sunday against . . . who is it against again, Mr Dixon?’

‘Welbrook,’ said Iain smoothly.

‘And are they an intimidating outfit?’

‘A walk in the park,’ said Iain. The headmaster found this expression priceless. Clive, meanwhile, slid backwards on the arm of the chair to try and get more comfortable, but felt the back of his trousers snag on something.

‘A walk in the *park!*’ Bang. The chamber was now empty. ‘Our team are, however, a few short. I myself am unable to help as my wife and I are out of the country this weekend at a wedding. But it would be wonderful if a few more of you could volunteer your sporting services to Mr Dixon. I am sure that it would be quite untoward of us to enlist Miss Wilson so early in her Frampton career – though she’s doubtless an absolute tearaway fast bowler!’

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Crouch laughed so loudly at his own remark that Clive was sure he felt some wax in his ear dislodge.

‘Mr Hapgood has apparently keenly offered his services only minutes ago, so please don’t be shy about following his excellent example.’

He beamed at Clive, and then performed a little bow to the assembled staff to indicate that his morning oration was over.

‘Playing cricket? On your day off?’ said Wally, as the hubbub resumed.

‘Hopefully not. I’m going to try to persuade some other people to play so that I can pull out.’

Clive made to stand, but found that he had not yet managed to work his trousers free of whatever it was that they had snagged on. He leant forward but could feel the fabric pulling, and so attempted instead to manoeuvre his posterior gently about in the hope of releasing it.

‘Have you got an itch, Mr Hapgood? You are a victim of events this morning, aren’t you?’

The headmaster turned to Flora Wilson.

‘I thought perhaps you ought to meet Clive Hapgood. Clive is a fellow historian. You’ll be working side by side, I imagine.’

‘Robert Icke’s told me all about you,’ said Flora as she offered her hand. ‘Pleased to meet you.’

Clive, still perched, took her hand and shook it warmly. He tried to stand as he did so, but the negotiations between his trousers and the chair’s arm were yet to reach a successful conclusion.

‘I would stand,’ said Clive, ‘but I’ve got a bit of an issue with my . . .’

‘You’re far too young for back trouble, Mr Hapgood,’ beamed the headmaster.

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‘It’s a problem with my trousers, actually.’

‘Ah,’ said the headmaster. ‘Marvellous.’

He held out his hands like a priest over the gifts, gave an assuming smile and turned on his heel. Wally stood up and proffered his own hand, remembered too late that it was it was burnt, and so simpered when it was taken.

‘I’m Wally,’ he winced. ‘Wally Davis. Welcome to Frampton, Miss Wilson.’

‘Yes, it’s actually Mrs Wilson.’

‘Oh. Well, in that case, congratulations,’ said Wally.

‘Ha. Not for long. I’m in the process of getting a divorce.’

‘Commiserations, then,’ said Wally.

Clive had spent the last few exchanges struggling to get free and now felt just a few crucial millimetres of thread from success. A gentle lean towards Wally was all it took and he at last felt some fresh air between his chinos and the chair. He stood up gratefully.

‘Thank you,’ said Flora. ‘It’s fine. It’s for the best. It’s partly why I’m changing schools. I’ve been given leave for the moment. My husband and I currently work at the same school.’

‘Right. Any children involved?’

‘In the school?’

‘Sorry. No. Your husband and you?’

‘No.’

‘I’m divorced,’ said Wally.

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ Flora said.

Clive, who had learnt that a conversation with Wally about his divorce was something to be avoided at all costs, tried to change the subject.

‘You’re here to observe us, are you?’ he asked. ‘I have to say, I didn’t actually know we were having a new teacher in the department.’

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‘No one told you?’

‘No. Not your fault, of course. And I’m delighted that we’ll have the extra support. Well, not support. Actual manpower. Not manpower, obviously. Another set of hands. More boots on the ground. Another member of staff, that’s all I mean.’

‘I know what you mean,’ said Flora kindly.

‘Thanks. Too tired to bloody think properly. I need a holiday. This term seems to have gone on for ever, and we’re not quite halfway through it yet. It’ll be much easier with you around. Unless someone’s leaving? Is someone leaving?’

‘No, I don’t think so. Apparently history’s becoming so popular at A level that they’ve had to expand the department.’

‘Right. Well, that’s a relief. Thought I might be getting the sack without being told.’

‘They haven’t told you?’

Clive found himself genuinely laughing. Wally suddenly sighed with despair.

‘Oh God,’ he said. ‘I’ve got the ruddy lower sixth in five minutes! Where does morning break disappear to? I’ve not even managed to have a coffee. Right. Better get my armour on. Nice to meet you, Miss . . . er, Flora.’

Clive and Flora watched Wally walk sadly away.

‘He seems nice,’ said Flora.

‘He’s fine,’ said Clive. ‘He’s just absolutely terrified of teaching.’

‘What’s Wally short for?’

‘What’s he short for?’

‘His name. Is it Walter? Quite old-fashioned.’

‘He’s called Duncan. It’s just that the students started calling him Wally and it . . . sort of caught on.’