This is a collection of the regular stories set in the boarding school AU, a teacher fic series featuring LotR (and some other) actors in a Yorkshire boarding school. Main characters usually are Eric Bana and Viggo Mortensen plus Orlando Bloom and Sean Bean, but also include Bernard Hill, Cate Blanchett, Karl Urban, Gerard Butler, Dominic West, and Dominic Monaghan.

These stories set between 1995 and 2013.
The Teachers

Chapter Summary

Meet the teachers

(Some of) The teachers

Religious Studies – Viggo Mortensen
Maths – Eric Bana
Philosophy – Orlando Bloom
P.E. – Karl Urban, Beth Riesgraf, Tom Hardy, Sarah Michelle Gellar
History – Sean Bean
Art History / 2nd Headmaster – Christopher Lee
Drama – Johnny Depp
Biology – Dominic Monaghan, Gerard Butler, Miranda Otto, Kiele Sanchez
Geography - Dominic Monaghan
Music – Billy Boyd
Chemistry – Elijah Wood, Dominic West
Physics - Dominic West
English – Bernard Hill, Emma Thompson, Paul Bettany, Gina Torres
English - Ian Holm
French - Cate Blanchet
Latin – Harry Sinclair
German - Craig Parker
Headmaster – Ian McKellan

HEADS OF HOUSE
Wellesley Hall - Sean Bean
Mirkwood House - Orlando Bloom
Amor House - Viggo Mortensen
Erebor Manor - John Rhys-Davies (since 2017: Miranda Otto)
Austen House - Emma Thompson
Palm House - Kiele Sanchez
The version of the past that people have agreed upon

Chapter Summary

Sean’s year in Jackson College in 1995/6 (featuring newly arrived Eric and sixth formers Orlando and Dom)

“I’ll take the blonde, you can have the dark haired one,” Viggo idly remarks.

“Yeah, sure,” Sean says automatically.

He flicks through the photocopied calendar he found in his pigeon hole. It’s the first day of the new year, and just like every year, it amuses him how administration really believes they can squeeze the entity of twelve month of chaos onto a couple of neatly typed pages.

“Hey,” Viggo says, prompts him by kicking his foot under the table. “Listen up, Bean.”

“I got it,” Sean replies, still thumbing through his calendar. “You’re desperate for a shag, and conveniently, there’s an NQT. Happy for you, mate.”

Viggo stays ominously silent, which prompts Sean to glance up. Viggo raises his hand and points, like an easily excitable kid at the zoo. Like that, Sean finally spots the two latest additions to Jackson College’s teaching staff, standing next to the door of the staff room. Despite Viggo calling dibs, Sean’s eyes instantly get caught by the blonde, specifically by her legs that don’t seem to end and would look perfect wrapped around –

“I saw her first,” Viggo interrupts Sean’s short trip to the gutter. “Stop staring at my future wife.”

When Sean laughs out loud, he looks only mildly affronted. Sean makes a half-hearted attempt at looking apologetic.

“Sorry, mate. But you in a committed relationship with anyone but Jesus? Nah.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Viggo replies without heat. “I told you, you can have the other one.”

Sean’s eyes dart back to the door, and for a second gets distracted by the blonde’s mouth. The only other unfamiliar face in the room belongs to the dark haired 6’2” bloke standing next to her. He bears closer resemblance to a wardrobe than anything female.

“He is good looking,” Viggo coaxes in the way a fishmonger would try to sell you an already smelly haddock.

Sean picks up his book again and whacks the side of Viggo’s head with it. It makes a very satisfactory smacking sound. That, and Viggo’s only half-startled yelp makes the two newcomers look their way. The blonde looks slightly bemused at the book Sean is still holding up. The bloke grins broadly. Viggo frantically rubs his ear, Sean uses the book to wave at the two of them, gesturing them to come over to sit with them.

For the ten seconds it takes them to reach their table, Sean finds himself contemplating what it must be like (what it has been like), starting a school year for the first time – anticipation and terror...
and everything. But delving into his personal past, to Sean it’s like catching the sniffles – something quickly overcome but briefly annoying. Spend too much time being nostalgic, and you miss the chance of out-flirting your best mate when a shapely new colleague sits down at your table.

Damn Viggo and his silver tongue.

Viggo lords what he calls ‘successful love warfare on all fronts’ over him for the next couple of days. Sean uses the chance to deck him in the entrance hall, pretty much straight before the pupils begin to trickle in. And it fills him with an extraordinary amount of smugness that – thanks to the completely impossible new kids assigned to him – Viggo is too stressed to retaliate immediately.

Sean, on the other hand, has blessedly mousy first formers in his house. But as if the universe wants to make up for that, he finds Ewan Doherty and Tammy Llewellyn with their pants down (or her skirt up, in Tammy’s case) in the storage cupboard even before classes have started again. At least telling that story over a beer on Sunday evening lands him in Viggo’s good books again.

On Monday morning, Sean starts his first lesson in his AS-level group the same way he starts 90% of his classes.

“Right, settle down,” he calls into the chatter. “Does anyone remember where we left off?”

The kids look at him with incredulity. Six weeks of summer vacation means tabula rasa. Sean considers himself privileged that most of them so much as remember his name.

“Anyone?” he prompts.

“You told us how you were gonna spend your summer break,” Robin Street says, of course without raising his hand first. “France, right? How was that, sir?”

“Yeah, did you go with Mr. Mortensen?” asks Jolene Sosamon.

“If so, why did you bring him back?” asks Orlando Bloom, and Dom Monaghan next to him cackles.

“Did you bring Miss Blanchett with you from there, sir?” adds Billy Porter instantly.

“Who?” asks Keisha Beckham.


The boys laugh, and Felicia Patrick uses her ruler to whack Billy.

“She’s from Melbourne. That’s in Australia, not France, you utter twat.”

“Whatever.” Billy shrugs the insult off easily, his attention back on Sean. “Is it true what they say about French women, though, sir?”

“Never mind them,” calls Keisha, leaning back in her chair, grinning. “What about the guys?”

Most of the pupils look at Sean expectantly. You don’t have to be an expert in military history to spot a diversion tactic as crude as this. Still, it is the first day, and to be honest, Sean hasn’t prepared a proper lesson anyway. He puts down the piece of chalk his fingers have been toying with.

“Yeah, okay, I reckon we can do that.”
“Do what, sir?” asks Robin.

“Play a round of ‘Trivial Pursuit’.”

Most of the pupils look instantly more lively, not that this was hard. Only Orlando frowns and asks,

“What’s the catch?”

“There isn’t one,” Sean assures. “I tell you about France. In turn, you tell me about the countries you visited. If you beat me, there’s no homework.”

“I had sex on the beach in Fuerteventura!” Dom instantly announces much to the delight of his mates. “One – nil, sir.”

Sean leans against the front of his desk, crosses his arms in front of his chest.

“In case you forgot, this is history A-level, Mr. Monaghan. Historical facts, not personal anecdotes. Especially if it’s one my imagination can very well do without.”

The class laughs, Dom included. Only Orlando’s competitiveness has no patience for jokes. He raises his hand, and Sean nods in his direction.

“Since 1963, prostitution in Spain was illegal,” Orlando informs them. “They changed that last year with the new Penal Code.”

Dom, sitting next to him, theatrically raises his hands in the air.

“God bless them. And a lovely girl called Marcella.”

Catcalls from some, groans from others. Jolene wrinkles her nose.

“First of, ew, Dom. Secondly, whyever would you know that, Orli?”

“Ah, don’t fret, Jojo,” Dom says with a huge grin. “I offered to share Marcella, but Orli said he only shags you.”

Orlando whacks the back of Dom’s head with a precision that is remarkable, considering that he is still pointedly looking at Sean. He leans back in his chair, mimics Sean’s posture by crossing his arms. Sean isn’t sure whether it’s intentional.


Sean answers with the invention of the guillotine and the number of public beheadings in the age of terror. In that fashion, he teaches most of his classes in the first week, wins most of the games and learns a truly disturbing amount of things about Russia and Lithuania thanks to Stan Bukowski and Dalia Ross.

The usual things occur during the first two weeks – Christopher manages to get into a massive argument with Bernard over Chaucer, some of the kids from Sean’s house laughingly tell him that their new maths and French teachers keep getting lost in the building, and Dom Monaghan serves his first bout of detention for causing a minor fire in his room.

So, all things considered, Sean is neither particularly surprised nor shocked to find Viggo asleep on his couch.
He hasn’t been present for the explosion in the morning. But according to Bernard, Viggo left Ian McKellen’s office whilst voicing his discontentment very loudly. And Sean has seen the new footprint against the wall opposite the headmaster’s office, definitely matching Viggo’s boots.

They are the same boots Viggo is wearing still, propped up on Sean’s coffee table as Sean enters his rooms. He doesn’t mind Viggo’s visits, not even when Viggo is morose and irritable. What Sean does mind is that Viggo has the habit of drinking all of Sean’s beer, once again evidenced by the four empty bottles standing guard around a full ashtray.

He sighs and carries the proof of Viggo’s coping techniques to the kitchenette without waking him. He was right. There isn’t any beer left in the fridge. He lights a fag and opens one of the windows, letting in the odd confused moth in exchange for ridding the room of the aroma of beer, cigarettes, and general frustration.

Bernard couldn’t tell Sean what Viggo’s row with Ian McKellen had been about, and he was surprisingly disinterested in finding out. ‘Just one of his moods’ was Bernard’s idle guess. Sean catches himself wanting to shrug it off as easily as Bernard did it. It makes him feel faintly guilty and he cleans his kitchen with more noise than necessary. Waking Viggo and listening to his drunk ramblings would be some sort of penance, though that itself isn’t a very charitable thought either.

He stubs out his cigarette and yawns. It is probably just because he is tired as fuck. He lets Viggo sleep, pulls a blanket over him like he has done it many times with exhausted kids in detention. Then he goes to bed.

It happens thrice more over the next month, without the alcohol though, because Sean hides that. Drinking alone in the dark (your own beer or that of your mate) isn’t really on the list of Sean’s favourites pastimes. Now, in company and in a decent location, that’s another thing.

They have a standing appointment, Bernard, Ian Holm, Viggo, and Sean– Friday nights in the local pub. Talking about school is strictly prohibited and punishable by having to by the next round. Frequently, others join them, despite Bernard’s attempt to establish a rule against outsiders trying to heighten the intellectual level of the conversations. This week Viggo asked Eric along – the tall, dark consolation price he tried to force down Sean’s throat at the beginning of the school year.

“Anyway,” Bernard says with flourish that (as per usual) is supposed to make up for his complete lack of having a point. “My wife says I am supposed to do more around the house. Yesterday she told me that I was worse than Gabriel – that’s my son, Eric – I ask you. He is so lazy, he gets us to open his soda cans for him!”

“The nerve,” Sean says and shakes his head.

“That’s what I told her. They are plotting against me, I tell you.”

“In his defence,” Ian says, “he is a six year old child. You aren’t.”

“You’re only as old as you feel,” Viggo argues and manages to look sincere.

Bernard nods sagely. Sean shakes his head.

“Now that for once Viggo’s mental theories accidentally support your immaturity, you’re taking him seriously?”

“I’m always siding with reason and logic!”
Sean and Viggo look at one another, then at Bernard and synchronically they start laughing. Bernard turns to Eric, who is unsuccessfully trying to hide behind his pint, it seems.

“Whatever they will try to make you believe, don’t listen to them,” Bernard says. “They are notorious liars. This one – “He points at Sean, “teaches creationism in his history classes, just because it narrows down the syllabus to the last 6000 years, give or take.” Sean opens his mouth to deny that, but Bernard doesn’t give him a chance. “Don’t even try to deny it. I know for a fact that you tried to get Viggo to teach your classes.”

“He lost a bet, and those were substitution classes!”

Bernard waves Sean’s protest aside dismissively and points at Viggo who is, at this point, already snickering.

“And Sean is nothing against this one! Viggo lives his life as advised by a magic eight ball.”

Viggo, busy with trying to down his pint in one go, gives Bernard a two fingered salute. Sean rubs his nose and glances at Eric. He has seen stronger man crumble under the insane reasoning that spills from Bernard’s mouth (or Ian’s, when he has had a few). And if that doesn’t do the trick, there is always Viggo’s seemingly accidental drive-by rudeness to scare them off.

When Viggo is done with his beer, a bit of foam still sticking to his upper lip, Eric nods slowly and turns to him.

“You teach R.E., right? Guess there are worse sources of information than a novelty billiard ball.”

From one second to the other, Viggo’s face grows very serious.

“What are you insinuating?”

Bernard glances at Ian, mild concern there. Sean has known Viggo for over a decade, and he isn’t always sure when Viggo means it and when he is just having a laugh.

Ignorance indeed seems to be bliss, though. Eric doesn’t seem fazed by the little thundercloud over Viggo’s head, he simply shrugs.

“Fortune cookies for example, they offer pretty neat suggestions on how to live your life. And I think the ancient Greeks used chicken. Or take Thai fortune tellers. Well, the last one, I might have accidentally walked into a bordello. Proper crystal balls aren’t supposed to disappear in orifices mid-show, or are they?”

He lifts his pint and his eyes seem to suggest ‘discuss amongst yourselves’. Bernard nods his approval in Ian’s direction. Sean agrees. At this rate they don’t have to fear that the conversation might turn into something meaningful. Still, he waits for Viggo’s reaction.

Viggo seems to contemplate Eric’s words for a second – whether it is the choices he has laid out, or the suggestion that faith and religion might be utter poppycock. Finally he flicks a peanut in Eric’s direction, possibly meant less as a reprimand and more as you would treat a clever elephant.

“You gotta tell that story again when McKellen is present,” Viggo says easily. “For years I’ve been trying to convince him that our school needs a class set of anal beads.”

Eric looks comically appalled.

“How do they teach sex ed in this country without?”
“Barely.”

“Poor kids, they don’t know what they’re missing.”

Sean could easily cure Eric of that misconception by inviting him to the upper level bathroom on a Friday night, but he doesn’t. Scaring of new teachers means having to fill in. Viggo, of course, is neither that considerate nor that sensible.

“We do have practical demonstrations with blow up dolls,” he says.

“With oral exams at the end, no doubt,” Eric adds without missing a beat.

“Some can be really anal about those, you wouldn’t believe it.”

“Yeah, bet some people are real cunts.”

Viggo looks – for lack of a better explanation – like Cupid has just shoved one of his arrows up his arse. He beams at Eric, and Eric grins back a lunatic would at a mirror. Ian groans quietly, like someone has hit him in the stomach with a very low aimed pun.

Sean hums in commiseration, then decisively empties his pint and puts the glass back down.

“You talked about school, Eric. Next round is on you.”

Eric frowns for a moment, and yes, technically it was Viggo, who started it. Still, Sean crosses his arms in front of his chest and nods at his empty glass. Eric just laughs and gets up.

“Same again, then?”

Whether it’s another round of pints or the usual routine in school, that’s really pretty much the same thing, considering. After the first unnatural burst of enthusiasm, pupils start slacking with their homework and assignment once again, Harry breaks the photocopier by spilling tea over it, and Sean’s first formers (who started out as big eyed bobbleheads) transform into little monsters. Dom Monaghan, despite being in the Upper Sixth now, remains the heavyweight champion of detention for crap that Sean is sure sprung from Elijah Wood’s mind. Only Orlando Bloom is surprisingly absent from the list; until the seventh week of the school year, Thursday, 7:30 p.m..

“I’m fucking aware that I don’t know everything,” Orlando says instead of a hello as Sean opens his door.

“For one, you seem to have fucking forgotten what I fucking told you about fucking swearing,” Sean replies calmly.

He is surprised that it took Orlando so long; his record is two days after the start of the term, in his third year. He leans against the doorframe and arches his brows. Orlando scrunches up is face in an obviously very difficult attempt to not roll his eyes. He looks slightly constipated.

“So, you’re not just here to fling random insults my way?” Sean asks.

Orlando shakes his head.

“Mr. Mortensen sent me.”

“If you called him a religious fanatic again, Orlando, I swear I will force you to pilgrimage to Canossa on your hands and knees.”

“I didn’t,” Orlando protests vehemently. Not, Sean thinks, because he changed his opinion, but
because he feels offended at being suspected of repetition. Orlando tilts his head. “Didn’t you teach us that the Walk to Canossa was a political masterstroke?”

“Yeah, but only because Henry IV’s grovelling was convincing. Something you might learn from that particular Holy Roman Emperor.”

Orlando grits his teeth. If he had been there in Canossa in 1077, the whole investiture controversy would have been quite spectacularly resolved with the public beheading of Pope Gregory VII. Sean shakes his head and crosses his arms in front of his chest.

“What did you do, Orlando?”

“Fuck all. – I mean, nothing.”

Sean sighs.

“What did you get sent here for, then?”

“Being sodding know-it-all who gets off on showing others up all the bloody time.” When Sean raises his brows, Orlando just shrugs. “Mr. Mortensen’s words, not mine.” A small calculating smirk creeps onto his lips. “You reckon he should get some sofa-time as well? For being foul-mouthed?”

“I’m sure someone with sensibilities as delicate as yours has suffered horribly.”

Orlando scratches the back of his head in agitation. Abruptly he bursts out, “I’m not a know-it-all. It’s hardly my fault that some people are so mentally retarded that that they can’t tell their own fucking arse from –“

“Orlando –“ Sean warns for a second time.

Orlando scratches the back of his head again.

“Yeah, sorry, sir,” he mutters. As much of a throw-away apology these three words are, they seem to cause him almost physical pain.

Sean sighs and pushes his door open further, beckoning him to come inside.

“I’ll put the kettle on,” he says, gesturing Orlando to take a seat on the sofa.

He knows won’t get to see this week’s ‘Match of the Seventies’. Instead, a conversation about respect and consideration suddenly got top billing. He has had that particular talk more times than he can count. And sometimes, like in Orlando’s case, he doubts whether it will ever make any difference at all.

However, it takes only an hour until Orlando (albeit grudgingly) promises to apologize. In exchange for getting to watch the rest of the footie with Sean. Sean isn’t entirely sure whether that is the most genuine of conversions, but on a Thursday evening after eight, he takes what he can get.

Orlando doesn’t show up on his doorstep for the next two weeks – which is normally his indicator that the words ‘I’m sorry’ not really made it past his lips – and Sean can instead spend his evenings with equally rewarding things such as grading homework.

At least the long hours usually guarantee him pretty much free weekends, and they are curiously blessed with sun, even though it is October already. Putting as much distance between his desk
and himself as possible, Sean chooses to spend most of the weekends that he is on duty by the lake.

“Did you get my postcard?”

Viggo is famous for his non-sequiturs. He plops down next to Sean on the weather worn bench close to the lake. It’s a mere guess that he is referring to his summer vacation.

“No, I didn’t.”

“I really sent one this year.”

Sean looks at him sceptically. Viggo pretends to be affronted.

“Well, I wrote one,” he insists.

“You post it, too?”

The slightly vacant look now taking over Viggo’s face tells Sean that he is really thinking about it. Sean watches how two kids, second formers by the look of it, fight a losing battle at the lake. They struggle with the rope holding the sole dinghy in place. Personally, Sean thinks it’s a bad idea to pull with all your might when you are standing on a landing stage this narrow. He is about to point out this small bit of afternoon entertainment when Viggo’s eyes regain focus.

“I might have to check my backpack and get back to you on the postcard thing.”

Sean chuckles. He liberates his fags from their confinement in the rolled-up sleeve of his t-shirt and offers Viggo one.

“How was Rio anyway?”

“Fantastic.” Viggo’s voice is muffled as he lights his cigarette. Then he leans back on the bench, both arms propped up on back rest. “I spent two days wandering around the city, trying to find the perfect angle to photograph Cristo Redentor.”

“That the huge Jesus statue? Thought they had postcards of that.” Sean holds Viggo’s indignant gaze for a second or two before he grins. “Did you find it, then? Your perfect angle?”

“Nah. First attempt, I got distracted. I got invited to a football game, and it’s impolite to refuse an offer like that.”

“From what I heard about South American footie fans, it might earn you a knife in the side.”

“Still, nothing compared to you in Bramall Lane Stadium. Torcidas could take a page from your book of fanatism.”

“Sod off,” Sean replies without heat. “There’s a difference between fanatism and dedication. What distracted you from your photographing the second time?”

Viggo looks like he can’t believe Sean wouldn’t rather talk about football. Sean is not completely obsessive, though, he does have other interests. Not that Viggo seems to believe that.

“Where does your sudden interest in photography come from?” he asks. “I remember a time in the Louvre when I couldn’t get you past the 19th century. Usually, it’s all regal paintings with you.”

“First of, way I remember it, we were still so pissed that morning, I lost you in the entrance hall and couldn’t find you till hours later.”
“I recall none of that.”

“Which speaks for itself, really. I had to look after the kids on my own, and –“

“‘I was hung over, and my French is utter crap’,” Viggo finishes for him. “Seriously, you’re like a dog with a bone.”

“Dieu ne pas pour le gros battalions, mais pour sequi teront le meilleur,” Sean replies, and he doesn’t even attempt proper pronunciation.

Viggo pulls a face as if in serious pain.

“God certainly is not on the side of anyone mangling la langue d’amour like that. And I have serious doubts regarding Voltaire as well.”

“My point exactly. Besides, I couldn’t care less about art,” Sean says, forcefully dragging them back on topic. “Specifically what you call art. I’m hoping for a distraction in form of a carnival dancer.”

Viggo laughs, but disappointingly shakes his head. He smokes in silence for a while. Sean’s attention returns to the two boys and the boat and the Gordian Knot. If he wasn’t so sure of their complete ineptitude, he’d have to go over there and chase them away; the dinghy is off limits without adult supervision.

“There was no distraction,” Viggo says, pulling Sean out of his own diversion. “I just realized that there’s no point to it.”

“What, trying to outsmart the postcard industry?”

“No, trying to capture it.”

“Art?”

“Faith.” Viggo makes a vague gesture, crossing himself, possibly without intent. “Haven’t you ever wondered why it is that humanity constantly tries to define what is, by definition, undefinable? Why the constant need to, quite literally, chisel it in stone?”

“Thought he was made of concrete, Christ the Redeemer.”

Viggo kicks Sean’s leg in response. Sean chuckles and drops his cigarette butt, crushing it under his heel before he leans back on the bench.

“Dunno. It always made sense to me. If you look at it from a colonial point of view, specifically in Latin America. Conquistadores arrived there and found no structure whatsoever, at least none that made sense to them. Logically they imported something solidifying, something like their system of belief. You need to get your set of rules from somewhere, don’t you, and to build something on that, you need a rock-solid basis. Or concrete-solid, as it were.”

At least something steadier than a rotting landing bay or a swaying dinghy. The two kids at the lake find that out first-hand the moment Sean glances back at them; they finally lose their balance and fall, arses first, into the shallow water. Sean chuckles, Viggo hasn’t even been paying attention.

“I’ll make you my chief of staff, complete with knighthood á la Cliff Richard.” Viggo says. “If I ever decide to invade some random untouched paradise and install the ‘l’Etat de Viggo’.”
Sean laughs out loud.

“What’ll you make yourself? Mayor? Monarch?”

“Pope, probably.” Viggo returns Sean’s smile, then adds more contemplatively, “Imagine living in that time and leaving everything behind to emigrate.”

“Nah, cheers. Enough stories of missioners setting out to spread the word of God in the jungle and ending up getting slaughtered –” Sean trails off.

“Gotta admire the dedication.”

“Or drowning on the way there,” Sean adds distractedly as he watches the boys at the lake. After they miraculously emerged from the muddy waters, he returns his full attention to Viggo. “Well, I don’t get it. The whole banking on getting cannibalized.”

Viggo’s eyes follow the small procession of two soaking wet pupils ambling towards them now. He grins, first to himself, then at Sean.

“I doubt you’d put up a giant Jesus statue in your backyard either, would you?”

Sean arches his brows.

“That postcard you claim you’ve written to me, it doesn’t show that statue by any chance, does it?”

Viggo’s grin amps up.

“Nah, close up of an arse. In a skimpy bikini bottom. With strawberries on it.”

Sean chuckles. He exchanges his smile for a scowl and a disapproving shake of his head as the two pupils ashamedly glance his way. In the evening, he has a hilariously great time mocking Ian Holm, who is the head of house of the two wannabe sailors, for having to give them a serious talk about the commandeering of ships and piracy.

In turn, Ian in turn joins forces with Bernard which is always annoying since they pay their pupils to pull their pranks for them, lazy sods that they are. At least this year, no one has selo-taped Sean’s classroom door shut. Instead they apparently give money to kids who can come up with the most redundant questions in class. Sean’s entire second form has to be minted when November comes around, and he puts it down to Bernard more than to their puberty that 90% of the questions revolve around the historical significance of shagging and STDs.

Still, November is full of other things that remind Sean that sex is a national sport almost as popular as football. And he would agree, at least when it’s not Tammy Llewellyn and Ewan Doherty, who is the fifth form’s poster child for an early detected sex addict. It turns out to be one of the slightly more awkward conversations during parent-teacher-evening, the one that Sean has with Mr. and Mrs. Doherty about their son. All he really wants to do is advise them to encourage him to wank. At least that way he won’t get anyone pregnant.

It’s on the same evening that Julia Janssen’s mom propositions to Sean. Instead of enquiring after her daughter’s (boringly average) first form marks, Famke Janssen first casually mentions that she is divorced and then brings up that she loves nude beaches. As far as come-ons go, it’s highly inappropriate and appetizingly straightforward, and Sean finds himself thinking about the advantages of seamless tanning as he glances at her cleavage. She scribbles down her number, and Sean returns her parting smile in a way that he knows is equally improper and blunt.
He means to tell Viggo about it, if only so he can later say it was Viggo’s fault. Contrary to popular belief, Sean does know how to pick up women who don’t have kids at his school. When one of his mates comments on it, he usually shrugs and says it’s just convenient. But it isn’t just that, it’s a bit of a thrill like this, and he has long ago given up asking himself what that says about him. Usually Viggo tells him anyway, in that mockingly reprimanding tone of his that is really just encouragement in disguise.

However, Viggo is nowhere to be found when Sean takes a smoking break now. Instead, Bernard ropes Sean into a discussion about Princess Diana’s appearance on ‘Panorama’ that Sean really does not want to be part of. Without someone edging him on, he momentarily forgets about the phone number in his pocket. All too easily, he finds himself pulled back into the normal loop of conversations about performance, behaviour, and perspectives.

Viggo is suspiciously absent a lot of times now. And even though Sean knows that he has this slightly mental fixation on the whole pre-Christmas time, he somehow doubts that it’s just that this year. For one thing, Viggo’s rooms don’t look like a Christmas elf office party gone out of hand. Viggo is also not volunteering when during a staff meeting Johnny announces this year’s theme for the nativity scene. Instead, Johnny gives an impromptu speech about mistletoe and other wrongfully neglected toes, Viggo is passing notes with Eric like first formers. It is Sean who ends up volunteering to help out.

What Johnny dares to call ‘alternative take on the nativity scene’ of course turns out to be a completely crazy circus. Sean finds himself helping a handful of kids from the drama class as they paint a background scenery while arguing with them which is the best Bond film—‘Goldfinger’ (in Sean’s expert opinion) or that new one with Pierce Brosnan (in their delusional minds). On the other end of the auditorium, Johnny is discussing costumes with his cast. At least Sean thinks he does.

“It’s fucking unfair, that’s what it is,” complains Dom in a voice that reveals that he really doesn’t give a shit.

“Teaches you to show up on time if you want a better role,” says Orlando.

Amusement erupts.

“Right,” says Elijah Wood. “Cause you are punctuality personified.”

“The lad doth protest too much, methinks” says Johnny.

“I don’t have to be, though, do I?” Orlando replies to Elijah. “Everyone’s waiting in bloody line for the messiah.”

Sean turns around, paint from his brush dripping lethargically onto the floor.

“You cast Orlando as Jesus, Johnny? Are you insane?”

Johnny turns around to face him, a sieve, a pot, and a pan in his hands.

“The only rules that really matter on stage are these: what a man can do and what a man can’t do. For instance, you can accept that your calling is to lie, and pretend, and amaze, or you can’t. But acting is in this one’s blood, so you’ll have to square with that.” He turns towards his actors. “And me, for example, I can let you drown, but I can't bring this ship into the port all by me onesies, savvy? So, can you sail under the command of a pirate, or can you not?”

The pupils, by this point all too used to Johnny’s idea of motivation, not in unison. Triumphanty, Johnny turns back to Sean.
“Satisfied?”

Sean clicks his tongue.

“Well, you’ve proved you’re mad.”

Johnny dramatically rolls his eyes and throws his hands in the air. Orlando raises his arms to his sides like they were bound to a cross.

“’Humanly speaking, it’s impossible, but with God, everything is possible.’ Matthew 19.25-26.”

Before Sean can say anything, Dom interrupts the slightly stunned silence.

“Why the hell do you know shit like that?”

Orlando drops his arms in order to shrug. Sean wonders whether Orlando read the Bible only to be able to spit its words in Viggo’s face. He also doubts that his own pupils ever picked up a history book with that much determination.

Johnny cuts off any further religious debate that would only divert from the real meaning of the nativity play. With a no-nonsense attitude he puts a sieve on Dom’s head and a pot and a pan on Elijah’s and Jordan Donovan’s. Some of the more persistent spikes of Dom’s green Mohawk find their way through the holes of the sieve as Dom grudgingly adjusts it on his head.

“It still don’t get why the Three Wise Men are wearing this shit.”

Elijah, Jordan, and Orlando groan. Apparently it’s not the first time Dom has pointed this out.

“First of all,” Felicia Patrick says in an uncanny imitation of Johnny’s voice, “it’s not ‘The Three Wise Men’ but –“

“The Fellowship of the Lord,” finish Orlando, Elijah, and Jordan with her.

“Yeah, about that,” Dom says. “We are still missing six people for this.”

“Household appliances represent the improvements of the modern world through faith and wisdom,” Johnny replies to the question directed at him, not caring at all that he is at least thirty seconds behind and the conversation has moved on without him.

“My pan mostly represents scrambled eggs,” Jordan says.

“I could eat,” agrees Dom.

“You can always eat,” says Orlando.

“It’s why you’re so fucking fat,” says Elijah with a sweet smile.

“Take the hands of the one who does the saving!” Johnny exclaims, completely ignoring his kids, and grabs Orlando’s hand to yank it up like he was a preacher holding a sermon. “The shears don’t so much represent any skills of the gardening variety, as it these would – in a place of extreme heat and dryness such as Jerusalem –prove to be not only ineffective but also highly inefficient.”

“So, what you’re saying,” says Judy Bishop with a quizzical expression. “Is that they represent Jesus’ ability to cut off all the strings that hold us back?”
Orlando looks at his scissor hands.

“No way. Way I feel it, I’m like a blessed Freddy Krueger.”

He glares menacingly at Elijah, who instantly raises a cooking spoon in defence.

“Both valid interpretations,” Johnny says without batting an eye.

“They are all fucking mental,” Keisha Beckham says to Jolene Sosamon and taciturn Cloe Scott, three feet from Sean.

All through the exchange on stage they haven’t even once looked up from their task (which appears to be painting a giant microwave onto cardboard). Even though Sean still holds a bit of a grudge against Kate for preferring doing her fingernails over participating in Sean’s lessons, he can see her point.

“What I don’t get,” says Jolene contemplatively, “is how these mongs still think they can beat Johnny at his own game.”


“What?”

“Flew to the Caribbean, rented a boat and played pirate for a month.”

“Sick!”

“I was all ‘as if’ when I heard it, too.”

“Anyway, Orlando only does it to piss of Mr. Mortensen anyway.”

“He’s well fit, though,” Chloe remarks philosophically.

Keisha stops colouring in order to look at Chloe with incredulity. Her face is scrunched up in disgust.

“Mr. Mortensen?! Ew, Chloe!”

Jolene snorts with laughter, and Sean, too, has to chuckle at the misunderstanding. Keisha looks back and forth between them in utter confusion.

Surprisingly enough, Viggo reacts with previously unknown grace when Sean informs him that his Sixth Form girls don’t want to bed him. He is even quite peaceable about the whole Orlando as Jesus business. And it’s not Orlando but, of course, once again Dom – and, surprisingly, Elijah – who serve the last detention of the year. For dressing up as bottom and top halves of the donkey from the nativity scene and causing Bernard to nearly run his car against a tree. It’s the day the Blades finally sack that stupid wanker Bassett and replace him with Howard Kendall. Sean’s desperate hope that he will turn the club’s rotten luck around makes him let Dom of with a mere slap on the wrist.

Bernard still invites Sean over to celebrate his birthday a couple of days later. Arriving at his cottage in the village that evening, Sean parks next to Viggo’s bright red bike, crookedly leaned against a tree, and squeezes through the small gap between Ian Holm’s beat-up Volkswagen and the truly gigantic rose bushes. As he is about to ring the doorbell, a deep and loud purring sound makes him turn around.
A flashy red muscle car pulls into the drive. Almost instantly the door to the cottage is swung open with a flurry – nothing like a completely over-motorized car to announce your presence. Bernard greets Sean with a pat on the shoulder and Elizabethan English which means that Ian Holm and he are already at it; King Lear it seems. Viggo pushes past Bernard as the door on the driver’s side opens and of course it’s Eric who climbs out. Australians and their understanding of subtlety. Sean rolls his eyes and when Bernard booms with laughter, he feels faintly caught in the act.

With his hand still on Sean’s shoulder, Bernard pushes him inside where Ian has cornered Bernard’s wife Marianne, Cate, and a handful of other guests in order to throw Shakespeare at them. Bernard pushes a glass of wine in Sean’s hands as, in the yard, the muscle car’s engine roars again. His spouse starts defending herself with free-form poetry and for some reason Sean gets stabbed by Ian with a piece of baguette. They are half-way through the following act, when Viggo and Eric return to the house.

As they start eating, Bernard starts praising ManU, and Sean accuses him of wanting to destroy his appetite with it. Cate is compassionate enough when Sean can’t help but lament the state of the Blades. Eric says with a sigh that ‘his Saints’ only finished fourteenth last year as well. Sean has no clue what sport Eric is even talking about. Viggo apparently does because he starts singing ‘Good Old Collingwood forever’ which makes Eric throw a spoon at him like an ill-mannered third former. And just like that the conversation isn’t about football anymore, not about proper football at least, but about Aussie Rules, about Eric’s love for the St. Kilda Saints and how unsurprising it is that Viggo supports a bunch of rude assholes. Eric and Viggo trade half-sentences back and forth that no person in their right mind can follow, and Eric ropes Viggo into a heated discussion over a bloke named Winmar. Sean eats in silence and tries to focus on Ian’s and Bernard’s report about their latest field trip. If you get invited to an Englishman’s home, you don’t monopolize the conversation with a mongrelized egg-and-spoon-race.

During the last week before winter holidays, Sean skips regular lessons – and much to his AS-level group’s delight. Instead of getting them to research the history of Christmas traditions for the nth time, he does strategies of warfare and lets the kids choose which ones they want to focus on individually. Jolene picks perfect economy strategies, Dom focusses on intelligence work, and Orlando leaps on Blitzkrieg. Sean thinks that this is a better character evaluation than any standardized screening test.

The minute winter break starts, all of the kids flee the scene like it is London during the Blitz. From the moment the bell rung for the last time, it takes Sean seventy-two hours from then on to be bored out of his skull. For the first time in God how many years he actually gets how some of the kids feel, some of the few that don’t leave the school during break.

Pushing the last book onto the shelf he has been reorganizing (that’s how bored he is), he sits down at one of the desks in the students’ library. He picks up his tea and props his feet up on the desk (Christopher would have a heart attack if he knew).

The small scale pre-Christmas feast for the remaining kids went down without a glitch for once. Sean is certain that this is down to the fact that both Dom Monaghan and Elijah Wood for once didn’t stay. Elijah had to be dragged from school grounds kicking and screaming. It’s not due to his deep attachment to Jackson College, but it’s because his mother forces him to visit all relatives of the apparently surprisingly extensive Wood Clan. At least that is what Dom said to Sean whilst waiting to be picked up for his skiing holidays.

The chance for pranks is minimal because of that. Sean knows most of the thirteen kids who stayed well enough to know that. Not one of them would even consider flooding the bathroom, barricading the main entrance with mountains of snow, or playing thieving Easter bunny with the Christmas parcels stacked under the tree in the great hall. Without pranks initiated by the kids,
retaliation from him and Viggo would be equally uncalled for and pathetic. Besides, Viggo spends so much time on the phone to Australia, Sean doubts he has any interest in pranks in the first place.

He sips from his tea, already a little too strong. He retrieves the bag before thinking of a place to put it. It ends up carefully adorning a small stack of outdated brochures about communism that Sean finally decided to throw away. He meant to get rid of these for five years now. Each Christmas he ended up stuffing them back onto the already overflowing shelf of dust gathering history books. He is certain that no one but him ever even glanced at the things, neither before nor after the fall of the USSR. But he isn’t good at throwing away things. He figures, in his field, he doesn’t have to be. All historians ever do is cling to the past.

For the first time, Sean considers not volunteering to stay on school grounds next year.

But then Famke, Julia Janssen’s mother, returns from her holiday from Barbados, and she invites him to check out her refreshed seamless tan over New Year’s Eve. She prefers Bach over Beethoven, beer over wine, and she is slightly taller than he is, especially in heels. She is pretty much the perfect woman, and that’s not even taking into account that she is bloody amazing in bed. 1996 starts on a high note for Sean, and he is still in a decidedly splendid mood when school starts again.

However, his mood once again proves not to be infectious. When he opens his door on Tuesday evening, he finds a very moody looking Orlando there.

“What is it with you and school breaks?” Sean asks in good-humour. “Every time you return from one, you end up serving detention the week after.”

“Yeah well, it’s because I miss this place so much.”

Orlando’s voice is dripping with unusually spicy sarcasm. He continues looking at his trainers and misses Sean’s raised eyebrows. Sean might have hit a bit too close to home.

“Why are you here, then?” he asks, getting back on track. “Mr. Mortensen again?”

Orlando shakes his head, and Sean isn’t too surprised. Viggo’s patience normally is best in January, after the Christmas holidays.

“Who then?”

“Mr. Lee,” Orlando spits out. “He said I was insolent, arrogant, insubordinate, contemptuous, and supercilious.”

“So he sent you to see me.”

“Only after I asked whether he was aware that most of these were synonyms.”

“Orlando.”

“Well, they are.”

Silence stretches again, and this time Sean waits Orlando out. When Orlando finally looks up, defiance as potent as nitro-glycerine shimmers in his eyes.

“So, I bought a motorbike,” Sean says conversationally and leans against the frame of his door. He knows that Orlando spends entire days in his cousin’s motorcycle repair shop every holiday. “It’s a BMW R60 6. From 1975.”
Defiance momentarily makes way for confusion on Orlando’s face. The he glares at Sean like he knows perfectly well what Sean is doing.

“Do you know anything about bikes?” he asks anyway.

Sean shrugs.

“First ones were the Daimler-Maybachs, built in 1885 in Germany.”

Orlando licks his lips, tilts his head.

“Do you know anything useful about bikes?”

“Insolent, arrogant,” Sean quotes, “and what were the other three again?”

Orlando’s jaw clenches. Sean crosses his arms in front of his chest. They stand like that for maybe a minute, a Mexican stand-off without the pistols. Finally, Sean turns around and grabs his key ring from the shelf. Then he pulls the door to his rooms shut. He motions to walk down the corridor.

“Where are we going?” Orlando asks.

“You’re gonna prove to me that you can back up that big mouth of yours. Since you know so much about bikes, you can help me out with mine, give the chain a proper cleaning.”

Sean starts walking, and Orlando is immediately at his side.

“That’s extortion, you know,” he remarks coolly.

Sean laughs.

“Write an angry letter or something.”

Orlando follows Sean out of the house, across the grounds, to the small school garage. It’s occupied mostly by cars in use, owned by the resident staff, but there is a section reserved for repair work. It is where Sean pushed his bike earlier in the day.

Orlando walks around it once, his hands in his pockets.

“How does it run?” he asks.

“The timing was a bit retarded, and that annoyed the crap out of me,” Sean replies. “I widened the point gap a bit, so the coils fire a bit earlier in the rev.”

Orlando looks at him for a long moment, and visibly readjusts his verdict. Then he slowly nods. Sean picks up the small box with cleaning supplies from the workbench and thrusts it into his arms. Orlando arches his brows, but after a moment he stuffs the box under one arm and snatches a piece of cardboard. He pushes it under the bike to avoid stains, then drops to his knees. He inspects the box’s contents, takes out the kerosene, and carefully reads the inscription on the can.

“Does it work properly now? The timing?” he asks when he has finished reading. He pours a little kerosene in the small pot and dips the toothbrush into the liquid.

Sean shrugs.

“I haven’t had that much chance to take it out so far. Icy roads, the last weeks, and we had snow
over Christmas.”

He leans against the workbench and picks up the spare taillight he meant to replace for a while now. Methodically, Orlando starts cleaning the chain with the brush.

“I was sweating my arse off, Christmas,” he says casually. “99° in the shade.”

“Where did you go?”

“South Africa, the whole family.”

“Not necessarily a holiday resort. Still, fascinating, undoubtedly, and not just since Mandela.”

Orlando doesn’t reply. He cleans the brush in the kerosene, then returns to scrubbing, repeats the whole procedure after an inch. He meticulously cleans four or five inches like that in absolute silence, apparently completely concentrated on his mundane task. Without looking up from the chain, he finally asks,

“Is everything about history with you? Don’t you sometimes feel, like, you’re always a step behind?”

Sean chuckles.

“Most days. But I doubt that has something to do with being a historian.”

A smile tugs at Orlando’s lips as he cleans the brush again. Sean crouches behind the bike and undoes the miniscule screws that hold the taillight in place. Only when he is done and pulls the old light off, Orlando speaks again.

“But what’s the point?” he asks.

“What’s the point of anything, Orlando?” Sean asks back.

Orlando is still working on the chain without looking up.

“Well, the point of being a farmer is getting food on your table, for instance. Point of being a mechanic is getting your bike working, so you can get from A to B. What’s the point of history?”

The way he asked the question, almost off-handed, idle, Sean wonders how many times Orlando has mulled it over, how many hours of thinking have gone into the very precise statement about farmers and mechanics. Orlando glances up when Sean doesn’t answer immediately.

“We study human behaviour through the times,” Sean offers, “To get a better understanding of the nature of mankind.”

He knows, right after he said it, that it’s more than a bit of a cliché. He should tell Orlando that he feels millennia melting away when he sees a thumbprint on a shard of pottery from ancient Egypt. In that second, he feels connected through time to people whose names and faces he will never know but whose identity – whose will to survive and improve and enjoy, kill and control and destroy – he feels as vividly as if it was his own.

Orlando sits back on his heels and regards Sean with a frown, like when he reads an explanation in the textbook too easy to not be suspicious.

“Well, that’s crap. Mankind is 99% tossers, always has been.”

Sean carefully pushes the new taillight into place and starts tightening the screws.
“And you and your mates are amongst the elitist one per cent who aren’t tossers?” he asks instead.

“Fuck no. My mates are idiots – have you ever met Dom? He takes nothing serious and is fucking resentful. And Elijah, he just can’t be arsed to own up to his own shit.”

Sean chuckles. Orlando’s assessment is blunt and a bit cruel, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t spot on.

“So it’s just you?” He asks. ”The enlightened one.”

Orlando just scoffs.

“I’m as useless as anyone else. But I can at least admit it. That’s at least something, right? Mr. Lee would never acknowledge that he’s wrong, not in a million years. And Mr. Mortensen, he is so unsure about the whereabouts of his God, half the time he blames us for having misplaced Him. It’s hardly fucking fair.”

“It would help if you didn’t point and laugh all the time.”

“I’m not laughing!” Orlando objects with enough fierceness to surprise Sean. “We’re supposed to do this, like, think for ourselves and criticize and whatnot, right? But no one wants to hear it, least of all you teachers. You’re all in-fucking-fallible because you once read a booklet on pedagogics.”

The insult is sharp, and it is deliberate, both clear in Orlando’s tone of voice as well as his eyes. Sean lowers the screwdriver.

“If you got something you want to talk to me about, Orlando, I’ll listen. But save your tirades for a night in the pub with your mates.”

“You just don’t fucking care at all, do you?” Orlando spits back. There is enough venom in his voice to make Sean look properly at him. His face is contorted with fury, and the purity of it makes it so damn obvious how young he is. Sean feels so fucking old for a moment, so old that he has forgotten what it was like to be this young, that he really can’t care, can’t understand, no matter how much he wants to.

He gets back to his feet, and his knees and shoulders remind him that crouching for so long isn’t something they appreciate. Stiffly, he turns his back to Orlando and picks up the old taillight he placed on the seat.

“Wipe this down, so we can finish here,” he says.

For a second, Orlando doesn’t move. Then Sean hears the scrubbing of the brush again. When he turns around again, Orlando is hunched over the chain once more.

“It’s not done yet,” he mutters stubbornly.

Sean looks down at his hunched shoulders, and he doesn’t sigh. Instead he puts his tools away, once again leans against the workbench and picks up the bike’s manual. He glances up from it every other minute, but Orlando never looks up from his task. He pedantically cleans the chain from all sides, and the front and rear sprockets, the quiet rishrashing of the toothbrush the only sound in the garage. When he is done, he takes one of the shop towels and wipes the chain down with the same thorough care.

Sean lowers his manual when Orlando looks like he has finished. But Orlando only rummages through the box and takes out two different cans of lube. Holding them both up, he looks up at
Sean.

“Which one?” he asks.

“Whichever,” Sean replies with a shrug.

Orlando skims over the description on both cans, decides and starts applying Teflon lube to the joints. When he is about half-way done, he breaks the silence again, again without looking up.

“Did you get it for Christmas, the bike?”

“You could say I gave it to myself,” Sean replies. “Just had some help picking it out.”

Orlando hums noncommittally, applies more lube.

“From Mr. Mortensen?”

Sean smiles to himself. Viggo on a motorbike would be a health hazard for the entire kingdom. Besides, Viggo seems to think investing his money in a flip mobile phone is a good idea for whatever reason. He shakes his head.

“No, it was someone else. You don’t know her.”

“Has she one as well?”

“If she has, she keeps it hidden.” Sean puts the manual down and pushes his hands into his trousers’ pockets. “Why do you want to know?”

Orlando shrugs.

“My cousin says riding only makes real sense if you’re doing it with mates.”

“Well, that, or if you want to get from A to B,” Sean corrects dryly.

It takes Orlando a moment to recognize his own words. He puts the lube can down and wipes his hands on the towel. He gets to his feet and nods at the bike.

“If the timing is still crappy, the carbs probably need to be adjusted. It's not that difficult. I can do it, if you want.”

Sean declines Orlando’s offer, but he takes it for what it is, not so much a peace offering or even an apology, but a temporary ceasefire.

At any rate, his bike runs just fine now, and despite the continuously shitty weather he takes it (as well as Famke) out frequently. Not that he really has time for either; work piles up on his desk, quite literally, and it doesn’t help that his Upper Sixth group starts getting jittery about their upcoming GSEs. Also, he confiscates weed from some of the usual suspects, has to explain to Dom Monaghan why he certainly is not going to sell the drugs back to him and ends up giving it to Bernard because he still owes him a birthday gift.

Around four hours into this year’s open door day, a mug of coffee is placed on his table in the auditorium, and a piece of cake. It looks slightly asymmetrical and is laden with sprinkles – a teenager’s idea of perfection.

Sean looks up from it to find Cate standing in front of his desk. He smiles.

“Didn’t know you had kids with us.”
She only looks ever so slightly bemused. He has yet to see her properly puzzled. He points at the coffee and the cake.

“I only ever get bribes from desperate people.”

She chuckles and pulls a chair – reserved for over-enthusiastic parents and squirming kids – closer and sits down.

“I must do something wrong,” she muses. “No one has even attempted to bribe me so far. Or threatened my life.”

It is because the dads are too busy staring at you, and the moms just wish they were like you, Sean thinks but doesn’t say.

“You looked like you could use a break,” Cate points at the cake. “And the kids selling these assured me that this was ‘a blissful holiday for the tongue’ and ‘like spring on a plate’.”

Given the surprisingly chilly February they are having, Sean supposes that it’s a valid marketing strategy. Still, he automatically glances over to the open doors which lead to the lobby. Pupils from the Upper Sixth have installed their usual cake booth there. Just now, Dom Monaghan is trying to poor a cup of coffee for someone. If his aiming skills here are representative, then Sean now knows who is going to be cleaning up the lads’ urinals from this point on.

“Did they also assure you that they didn’t spit into it?” He asks. He picks some of the sprinkles from the cake and pushes them between his lips. “They do, sometimes.”

Cate looks thoughtful for a moment.

“That’s reassuring, actually. I was pretty surprised by the baking. It shows suspiciously admirable initiative.”

“Yes well. The supplies come from the school, and they are allowed to keep the money.”

“For drugs and prostitutes?”

Sean laughs and shakes his head.

“To finance their graduation bash, which amounts to pretty much the same thing. Still, I think of it as a lesson in applied mercantilism.”

“Import cheap raw material materials, export finished products for a much higher price.”

“Straight A for Miss Blanchett.”

Cate smiles, and Sean holds out the plate to her. She breaks of a chunk of cake of for herself.

“What has Ian assigned you to today?” he asks.

“I’m chaperoning the tours through the school, the ones done by first formers, together with Eric.” She points over to the open door once again, to the momentarily abandoned sign that says ‘Insider tours! Wait here and be amased by our expert guides!’ in sparkly and slightly crooked letters. “I have to admit, I was a bit sceptical. To tell you the truth, I still am barely able to find the staff room and my classroom.”

Their conversation is interrupted by Jolene Sosamon, who halts in front of Sean’s desk.
“Would it be okay if I throttled Dom, sir?” she asks with an abruptness that rivals Orlando’s.

“His parents might disapprove,” Sean argues.

“I highly doubt that.”

“Anything I can do for you, except sign off on a killing?”

She nods and runs a hand through her blonde hair, ridding herself of her long strands as well as the small talk.

“Yeah, do you have a key for the pantry? Lijah and Dom had a wager on who could down more milk in two minutes. Consequently, we’re out now. Of milk.”

Sean pulls his key ring out of his trousers’ pocket and holds it out to her.

“You can tell them, if either of them throws up in public today, I am volunteering them for cleaning duties during the graduation party.”

Jolene pockets Sean’s keys and swiftly turns on her high heels.

“Will do, sir.” And definitely more to herself than to Sean she adds quietly, as she is walking away, “Fucking mongs.”

Sean chuckles, and there is a smile curving up Cate’s lips as well. She leans over to him conspiratorially.

“See, I didn’t even know we had a pantry. How do the kids do that?”

“You’re quick to learn about the secret passages and hiding places if they help you getting out of doing your chores,” Sean replies easily. “Hey, let us in on the latest secrets of the ongoing hide-and-seek when you’re done with your tours.”

Cate shakes her head.

“I’m afraid I can’t. Adrian Beaten made all of us swear a sacred oath to never tell an outsider what we have learned today.”

Adrian Beaten is in Sean’s house, a four feet miniature professor, aged 11. The boy has just arrived at the tour sign again. He adjusts his glasses and obviously waits for new customers, looking very officious. Sean believes Cate was once again quoting verbatim.

“Is that why Eric isn’t with you?” Sean enquires. “He got dragged to the dungeon?”

“He very well might have been. Not by the kids, though. Viggo attached himself to our last group, and five minutes later, both of them had disappeared.”

Sean chuckles.

“Explains why he hasn’t tried to save me, so far.”

“Save you? From what, me?”

“From what he likes to call ‘the fucking greatest waste of his fucking time’.”

“He’s very eloquent, your friend. And patient.”
Sean appreciates sarcasm, especially when delivered this dryly. He holds out the plate with cake again, but Cate shakes her head, apparently more interested in insights than pastry.

“Last year,” Sean says obligingly, “he nearly broke my back. He rugbytackled me from out of nowhere while I was showing the common rooms to some prospective pupils. And later he expected me to thank him for it.”

“Did he actually save you from something?”

“What could he possibly save me from during open day?”

“A pupil with rabies?”

“We don’t have rabies here. If a kid shows any symptoms at all, we take it behind the bike sheds and shoot it.”

Cate looks like she wants to reply, but something behind Sean catches her eye instead. He turns around to follow her gaze. Outside on the lawn, visible through the great window front, there is a group of first formers behaving like a pack of little terriers on a sugar rush. All their attention is focused on Eric, who is towering over them all in their midst. He is obviously demonstrating what to do in case of a fire emergency. At least this is what Sean gets from the fact that he has shouldered Viggo in a fireman’s carry. Viggo’s kicking feet nearly hit one of the kids in the head. Eric slaps him on the backs of his thighs, much to his audience’s delight.

“It does explain a lot,” Cate says contemplatively, without tearing her eyes away from the peculiar sight. “If Eric’s real job is fire-fighter. It would explain that strength. Well, and the brain damage he must have suffered from repeated lack of oxygen.”

Sean arches an eyebrow. Cate looks at him with almost regal seriousness.

“I mean it. Did you know he is completely incapable of even the most basic courtesies? Last week, he asked me over to plan this year seven day trip. And he didn’t even offer me something to drink. Claimed Viggo drank it all. I ask you.”

Ignoring the shenanigans outside, Sean turns his attention to his almost empty plate, still laden with sprinkles.

“Well, Viggo does that,” he says.

If Cate hears the slight change in his voice, she lets it go.

“And how is that my problem?” she instead asks with mock outrage. “If I lower myself to chaperone his bunch of math geeks, then the least he can do is offer me a drink. Dipstick.”

Sean laughs and licks sprinkles from his fingertips.

“You want to go for a pint when we’re done tonight? I’m buying.”

She turns back to him and smiles. For a moment she just looks at Sean, and damn she does have fantastic eyes.

“You do know that I’m married, right?”

Sean didn’t, but it doesn’t make much difference anyway. He didn’t mean it like that.

With a smile, he says, “Ah well, I have a rule about not sleeping with colleagues anyway.”
“Very sensible of you. Is that the same rule you have about pupil’s mothers?”

Sean laughs out loud.

“Who told you about that? Viggo?”

“Eric, I think.” She props her chin up on her palm, tilts her head and looks at him with interest. “It’s not true, then? The thing about your affliction for blondes and moms, and blond moms?”

That’s only partly true, really. Sean would never narrow the field to just one hair colour. Julia Janssen’s mother can vouch for it, and a couple of others, too. He says as much to Cate, though. Instead, he mimics her head-tilt and smirks.

“So, you’re coming for that drink, or what?”

She does, and she turns out to be a fantastic wingman, too. Better than Viggo who could never be convinced that telling people Sean was a rocket scientist wasn’t helpful. Sean set out to have a quick pint with a colleague, but by the end of the evening, he has had a truly brilliant time, as well as two phone numbers. From blondes, no less, because Cate insisted.

However, things temporarily go downhill from there. During revisions with his AS-level group, Sean gets the distinct impression that no one remembers anything about anything, and his kids heading for GCSEs don’t do much better. The exam stress also has a devastating effect on friendships and romances. More than once, Sean wishes he had Viggo’s astounding tolerance for adolescent drama, or at least he had Viggo sitting on his couch, saying just the right thing to a tear-streaked, barely coherent Tammy Llewellyn. But as things are, he repeatedly finds himself playing relationship counsellor. It’s a job he personally doesn’t think himself all that qualified for.

When he hears the tell-tale noises, coming from the entrance to his house, he regrets extending his rounds to the outside. The luxury of a fag on the way is promptly paid for. He is so not up for chasing kids up and down the lawn tonight – he is in a foul mood, and his ankle is swollen to the size of a honey melon thanks to a third former’s tackle on the pitch this afternoon. Sodding ‘sport for charity’ weekend, next time he’ll sign up for chess.

He stops in his tracks, takes most of his weight off his injured foot, and listens into the darkness. The empty yard carries the sound of feet tiptoeing like they were clad in army boots. He waits until the footsteps get louder, he can make out different hushed voices, and the sound of something else, a quiet whirring. He stands completely still. The approaching kids must mistake him for a tree because they come as close as four feet until Sean switches on his torch.

Four of Sean’s fifth formers have frozen mid-movement, like Sean was the fucking Medusa. He lets the light from his torch rake over Ben Buckner and Ewan Doherty, as well as Daon Broni and Marcus Howard who are pushing two bikes. Daon is barely over five feet tall, the mountain bike he is holding is clearly made for a giant; the one in Marcus’ hands is definitely Viggo’s.

“What?!”

“Where do you think you’re going with these?” Sean demands to know.

The boys exchange a look. Daon, Marcus, and Ewan shake their heads, but Ben blurts out,

“Mr. Mortensen started it!”

Three pairs of eyes grow even wider, Sean’s narrow.

Another exchange of looks, then they talk all at once.
“We were really only retaliating, promise.”

“Mr. Mortensen really started it!”

“Well, that might have been accidental –“

“Shut up, Marcus, he totally did it on purpose!”

“It’s not about that thing alone anymore anyway, is it?”

“Yeah. Be gay for Mr. Mortensen all you want, but –.”

“Fuck you, I’ve never –“

“Quiet!” Sean bellows.

The boys, just a second before on the verge of a scuffle, instantly deflate. Sean directs the beam of his torch at the tallest of them.

“Ewan, in four sentences or less.”

Ewan, by day one of the brighter half in Sean’s fourth form, gulps hard and frantically tries to compress what undoubtedly is a tale of epic proportions.

“In the charity bike ride this morning, right, Mr. Mortensen put down wrong times for our team. So, in turn, we let the air out of their wheels. And then, after lunch, Mr. Bana switched the direction sign around at the crossing, he must have done. It nearly cost us our win ‘cause –“

Sean uncurls the fourth finger of his hand demonstratively, and Ewan trails off. Sean shines the torchlight down at the bikes.

“And now you took their bikes to do what exactly?”

The boys shift from one foot to the other. A suspicious number of glances goes past Sean’s shoulder, to the lake.

“You wanted to toss them into the lake?” Sean concludes, a hint of astonishment in his voice.

All boys show signs of immediate guilt, but only Marcus actually nods. Daon instantly elbows him in the ribs.

“You total tit, shut your fucking –“

“One more word, Daon, and I will throw you into the damn lake!” Sean barks. He looks from one boy to the other. “Let me get this straight: You were about to commit a felony because of a few lost seconds?”

“But sir –“

“Don’t ‘but sir’ me, Ben! Neither of you imbeciles considered getting me involved before. You’re not discussing this with me now. Are we clear?”

Ben swallows another ‘but’ and nods reluctantly. Sean shakes his head.

“If those bikes end up in the lake, I’m calling the police.”
The boys look absolutely horrified, and Sean growls with frustration. He runs a hand over his face and just shakes his head again.

“There is a difference between a prank and a crime, you idiots!”

Neither of the boys try to argue with him. He gestures at the bikes.

“Put these back, and go back to your rooms,” he instructs. When they don’t instantly move, he makes an impassionate shooing motion. “Go on then. It’s late.”

The boys exchange looks once again, then Daon and Marcus turn the bikes around. Ben mutters, “Yes, sir,” and Ewan adds, “Sorry, sir” before they follow their friends.

Sean watches them disappear into the darkness. He knows they expected a proper ticking off, and they bloody deserve one, too. He should kick their arses for being so fucking stupid in their attempt to get even. Whoever is to blame for things escalating like that, he doesn’t give a damn, but all of this leaves a fucking bad taste in his mouth. He wants to drown not only Daon in the lake, but his accomplices, too. And Viggo and Eric as well, while he is at it.

He turns and walks in the opposite direction towards the lake, lighting another fag.

The next day, he is on the football field straight after breakfast, half an hour even before his girls have to show. He has kicked the ball around with two early birds from his fourth form for a while when, in small groups, the majority of his girls trickles onto the pitch for the second half of the weekend’s charity event. They are all well-rested and enthusiastic to have a go with the ball.

The cyclers only turn up when Sean’s footballers are already almost done with their warm-up routine. Almost instantly, there is a hubbub at the bike shed. With a frown, Sean tells the girls to carry on and walks over. In his head, he is already going through all the places where he can hide four bodies.

In front of the bike shed, pupils and teachers alike stand in a circle around something. The general atmosphere lowers Sean’s blood pressure considerably, even before he can see the reason for the amusement for himself.

Viggo’s red bike and the giant mountain bike from the night before are still very much there. Furthermore, they are secured from thieving hands by approximately ten feet of slightly rusty chain. It hung in the shed for years, and it is now repeatedly and artistically woven through the wheels and the frames. A solid padlock connects its ends, making the two bikes practically inseparable, and a crumpled piece of paper is attached to the mountain bike’s saddle. “Good luck with your tandem!” is written on it, in what Sean instantly identifies as Marcus’ handwriting.

“What the hell?” someone exclaims.

Sean turns around and finds Eric and Viggo standing next to him, both looking rather perplexed.

“Goddammit,” Viggo mutters, sounding impressed rather than angry. “I told them I didn’t fuck with their times.”

Eric hums consolingly and almost convincingly. Amusement bubbles up his throat, and he turns laughing eyes at Sean.

“Better not fuck with your kids, eh, mate?”

Sean laughs and pats Eric’s shoulder before he returns to his girls.
When in the evening, Sean tells Cate about this in the pub, she laughs so hard that she snorts beer through her nose. It’s the first time he witnesses her doing something undignified, and somehow this, on top of Viggo’s surprise and Eric’s easy acceptance, reconciles him with the universe at large.

He does crosswords during staff meetings (which is far more relaxing than listening to Harry getting into yet another pointless argument with Christopher), and he grades homework in his bathtub. He also starts revisions from scratch, and it doesn’t take long until Jolene Sosamon and Chloe Scott start organizing revisions on their own time. And he doesn’t say no when Bernard offers to share some of Dom Monaghan’s weed with him. It turns out to be good enough that, if Dom should fuck up his A-levels, Sean would advise him to pursue a career as a drug dealer.

When on a Wednesday evening, he opens his door and finds Orlando there, he is a bit surprised for once. Orlando should be too busy studying to have any spare time for general insolence or pranks. R.E. is due the day after tomorrow.

“I was wondering,” Orlando says, uncharacteristically reticent, “whether you have a moment?”

Sean’s eyebrows arch a fraction out of their own volition, but he steps aside and lets him in.

Orlando promptly slumps down on his usual corner of the sofa. As Sean puts on the kettle, searches for his last tea bags, Orlando picks up a footie mag from the coffee table. He has flicked through half of it until he realizes that it is upside down, then he tosses it back onto the untidy heap it came from, and his foot starts to twitch. Sean pushes a steaming mug into his hand. As he crosses the room to his armchair, he kicks Orlando’s nervous foot.

“Are you behind with you revision?” he asks.

Orlando looks downright affronted.

“I finished R.E. a week ago, and I’m almost through with history.”

“Impressive.”

Orlando frowns.

“Are you patronizing me?”

Sean chuckles.

“History is only in three weeks. I really am impressed, that’s why I said it. Otherwise, I’d call you a stinkingly lazy punk.”

Orlando smiles at the choice of words, momentarily pacified.

“Yeah, okay. It’s not that, though.”

“Did you and Jolene have a falling out?”

Orlando frowns at him, like the nature of that question proves Sean has gone mental. Then he shakes his head with the easy dismissiveness of someone sure of his possessions.

“No. Mind you, she’s fucking – sorry – she’s completely hysterical half the time. Going mental over the exams. Like that’s helpful.”

Sean could tell him that it is normal, that it is nothing you can fully control, that this is when you
need support, especially from your significant other. It is helpful advice. It is also patronizing as fuck.

Orlando turns the mug of tea in his hand for a moment, his mind clearly not with his girl-friend any longer but with important things.

“So, my mum says I should apply for drama school after graduation,” he says then, as abrupt as usual. “My father says I should do something ‘sensible’.”

“Such as?”

Orlando lets his voice grow darker, the Canterbury accent more prominent.

“‘Study law, son, medicine, business. Something useful and reliable.’”

Even his posture changes for a moment, mimicking a particular mixture of self-assurance and self-importance Sean has seen in countless oppressively well-meaning fathers. Not for the first time he gets why Orlando’s mother wants to send him to drama school. The ghost of Orlando’s dad is gone as quickly as he appeared, and Orlando shrugs.

“Reliable. He’s one to talk.”

“And what do you think?” Sean asks, because one problem at a time, and daddy issues haven’t got precedence tonight, apparently.

Sarcasm is still sharpening Orlando’s voice when he asks back, “Is that straight from the handbook? How to counsel students?”

“’Course. How I learned to make tea and what instructed me to buy that sofa.”

Instinctively, Orlando eyes the mug in his hand as if its content might have been poisoned. Sean laughs, and Orlando pulls a face.

“What do you think?” he asks back sharply.

“’Bout what you should do with your life?”

“’Suppose.”

Sean leans back in his chair and thinks about it for a moment.

“You’ve always had good grades, once you decided to apply yourself. Specifically anything that requires straight analytical thinking. You could work some on your people skills.”

Orlando waits for half a minute longer than Sean expects him to.

“I know all that. What does it add up to?”

Sean shrugs.

“Isn’t that what you get paid for?” Orlando asks.

“What does the sign on my door say?”

Orlando rolls his eyes but quotes from memory when Sean looks at him pointedly.

“One does not simply walk into Mordor. One knocks first.”
“Exactly. Not a peep about ‘job centre’.”

“You know that this isn’t in the books, right?”

Orlando’s foot starts twitching again. Sean rubs his nose.

“I can’t give you an answer,” he says, more seriously.

“Because it’s part of the whole growing up experience, finding it myself?” Orlando asks back instantly. “Please. And I’m Oliver fucking Twist. Not.”

“Dickens is part of the syllabus?”

Orlando shakes his head and waves the distraction aside dismissively.

“Mr. Mortensen said I could become anything I wanted to,” he informs Sean, once again without segue.

For once, Sean is too surprised to reply. Not because of the nature of the advice, this very much sound like Viggo exactly. But because Orlando asked him in the first place, and asked him before Sean.

“Anything I wanted to’,” Orlando repeats with another shake of his head. “What if I wanted to become first black president of the USA? Or the first man on the moon? What sodding stupid advice.”

“Still, more than you can come up with,” Sean replies much harsher than he intended to.

A second later, or barely that, he realizes that he knows that tone of voice he’s just spoken in. This sharp edge to it, this thing that makes his jaw hurt when he futilely tries to keep it inside.

He lets out a surprised laugh and rubs a hand over his face.

Fucking hell.

Orlando narrows his eyes, suddenly looks intently focused, like a scientist who just discovered a new species.

“So, you think Mr Mortensen’s advice is good? Or do you just feel you have to think that ‘cause he is your mate?”

His fingers tap a staccato rhythm on the armrest, his nervous foot works overtime. The frown on his forehead is chiselled in so deeply, it must give him a headache. Just for a moment Sean knows what it must be like for Viggo sometimes, having Orlando in his class.

“I don’t know,” Sean admits. “I don’t have any advice for you.”

Orlando looks startled for a moment, then instinctively returns to his go-to frame of mind.

“Why the hell not? Everyone else does!”

And that’s the answer right there, and Orlando arrives at this conclusion only the fraction of a second after Sean. Whatever Sean could suggest, it would be just another bucket of crap on the already piled up heap of expectations. And Orlando goes skinny dipping right next to the ‘no swimming’ sign, would rather drown than listen to people yelling at him to swim for the shore. Doesn’t mean that he won’t try his damnedest to find someone else to accuse of negligence.
Sean is smiling at the mental image; he only notices when Orlando reacts to it by pursing his lips. It looks like a petulant pout, and suddenly, Sean finds himself laughing, because it's a kid he is talking to. The ridiculousness of his own brief dip into the pool of adolescent jealousy makes him feel almost lightheaded with amusement.

“What?” Orlando demands, and he sounds more curious and confused than angry. “Why are you laughing?”

Sean chuckles again and shakes his head. Orlando, eyes still fixing him with interest, takes another sip from his mug.

“Yeah, okay,” Sean then says peaceably. “So, become a lifeguard, then. Cross your fingers, you might even get to work with David Hasselhoff.”

Orlando splutters. In an effort to not spit his tea all over Sean’s coffee table, but unable to contain his laughter, he has a huge coughing fit. Sean doesn’t bother to hide his grin and drinks his tea while Orlando nearly chokes on his sofa.

“Or become a gardener, I hear that’s relaxing,” he continues when Orlando can breathe again. “Phone psychic. Costumed Mascot, you might enjoy that. Snake milker.”

Orlando wipes tears from the corners of his eyes.

“What the fuck, I mean, the hell, is a snake milker?”

“Someone who extracts venom from snakes, obviously. You’d be good at that.”

Orlando sniffs and empties his cup of tea.

“I’m taking a gap year,” he then says with surprising finality. He makes it sound as if it was a decision about flavours of fizzy drinks.

“Fine, do that,” Sean says calmly.

“I’m phoning my parents tomorrow,” Orlando says, and he sounds serious. “I’ll tell them I asked you and you told me bumming about in Europe for a year would be a good thing for me.”

Sean shrugs.

“If you need to hide behind someone, it might as well be me.”

Orlando rolls his eyes and dramatically lets himself slump against the backrest of the sofa again. He is grinning, though.

“Man, you take the fun out of everything.”

“The only reason I’m doing this job.”

Orlando laughs and links his fingers behind his head.

“Seriously now, can I ask you something else?” He actually waits until Sean nods. “Did you always want to become a teacher?”

It is a question that catches Sean off-guard, and he doesn’t even know why. He looks at Orlando for a long moment, feeling like a seasoned footballer who is suddenly supposed to play a completely different strategy. Orlando’s posture is for once not challenging, and strangely, Sean
finds that more unsettling than his usual provocation.

So he tells Orlando that originally he wanted to become trainer of the Guadeloupian national football team for women and only turned to teaching when that fell through. Orlando narrows his eyes at him and ‘yeah, right’s him with no malice, and things turn back to normal. Sean finds himself talking about teaching after that anyway, and Orlando’s horrified reaction to not even the most ludicrous experiences is kind of hilarious.

When the time for graduation comes around – after all the exams, some tissue handing, some arse-kicking, some biting-his-own-fingernails – Sean slightly regrets telling Orlando about some of the shenanigans in Jackson College’s past. It is a very rare exception that kids from the Upper Sixth do something else but celebrate their own greatness during graduation week, but Elijah and Dom manage to get in a respectable number of five school-wide pranks in as many days. Four of them very much feel like a repetition of history to Sean.

He isn’t sure whether he isn’t just imagining it until Viggo (wearing clothes a couple of sizes too big for him because his own miraculously disappeared over night) comments on it as well. When Sean runs into Orlando on the corridor, Orlando just gives him his most beatifically innocent smile that fools no one. At least not Sean.

And just like that, and just like every year, the school year ends – paradoxically abruptly, considering how very much everyone is looking forward to summer break even weeks before. After hectic weeks of last minute grading, of staff meetings, after being the bearer of good and bad news, a staff party that ends with Bernard marooned on the lake, and after a lot of ‘be good, see you in six weeks’ speeches, it’s all over once again. The kids disperse, and Sean manages to escape before Christopher (who thinks that summer vacations should be spend cleaning up the school archives) can lay eyes on him.

He spends some of his break with Famke, part of it hiking in Portugal. Of course the latter isn’t his idea. He even categorically refuses to consider it when one of his oldest mates suggests it on the phone. But something about Daragh’s inoffensive passive aggression has always left him defenceless. So he buys hiking boots and Daragh greets him at Lisbon airport with a bone crushing hug. Sean feels a little better about his ineptitude to say no to him when he spots Jason and John just a couple of feet behind. He distinctly remembers that during their last meeting, Jason was very adamant that he did enough marching for a lifetime when he was in the army. He is now taking the bus everywhere.

In midst the almost untouched wilderness of Portugal, Sean occasionally finds himself longing for a spot of British culture, namely a cup of tea. But all in all, it is good to prove to himself that he can survive two weeks without school, without getting caught up in the circular drama, without worrying about his house.

They spend a week on a trail obviously meant for men half their age (at least that’s what John claims). Daragh can’t seem to say no to a hefty meal once it’s offered in the roadside hostels, and Sean, Jason, and John feel inclined to agree, especially as far as the Portuguese wine is concerned. John starts singing folk songs to distract Sean from the blister on his right foot, Jason nearly tumbles down a hill because he isn’t looking where he’s going in favour of reading Voltaire, and in total they cover about a third of the suggested distance. It has nothing at all to do with Sean being (falsely) accused of being completely unable to read maps or the fact that he may or may not have been slightly distracted by what Daragh calls ‘the local petticoats’.

When he returns to Jackson College a week before school starts again, two postcard are waiting for him.

The first one shows a Buddhist temple in Lhaza. He turns it over and reads:
"If this one doesn't reach you, I'm going to kill the postman. Greetings, Viggo."

The second one shows an aerial view of Bologna, a typical holiday motive. On the back, in messy handwriting which he recognizes instantly, is written:

“The University of B. was founded in 1088, 11 years after Henry IV’s Walk to Canossa, 22 after William the Conqueror. That’s three – nil, sir. – Cheers, Orlando Bloom.”

Underneath that, with the same pen but in a decidedly neater hand, it continues:

“Dear Mr. Bean! Greetings from Bologna where we spend the weeks before uni starts. The weather is hot and the wine is great! I hope you’re having a lovely summer! – Take care, Jolene Sosamon.”

Sean stands in the middle of his (slightly dusty) rooms and laughs out loud. Then he puts the kettle on and sticks the postcards to his fridge, next to a couple of others from travelling pupils and colleagues that have found their way there over the years.

On the first day of the new school year, Cate is chatting with a slightly waifish strawberry blonde and a grumpy looking bloke, who looks decidedly uncomfortable in his suit. Sean hasn’t seen them in the staffroom before. NQTs, his brain automatically concludes.

“I’ll take the redhead. You can have the cheery one,” Viggo says.

Sean abandons his photocopied calendar in favour of a book about the Industrial Revolution he rediscovered on his desk upon returning. Coming back after the summer break is a bit like Christmas that way.

Viggo’s elbow connects with his upper arm, and Sean glances up.

“What?"

“I said,” Viggo repeats, impatient, “I call dibs on the redhead.”

Sean expects instant protest from Eric. When it doesn’t come, he turns his head and glances around.

“Where’s he got to?”

Viggo looks confused for a moment but then catches Sean’s lingering gaze on Eric’s abandoned chair.

“Hobbled off to the loo five minutes ago. You think I should go and check up on him?”

“On the bog?”

Viggo shrugs easily.

“Maybe he got stuck and needs help.”

“You supported me enough, what with you laughing your arse off when I came in like this.”

Both Sean and Viggo turn around to find Eric standing behind them. Sean has to give it to him – sneaking up on people with a leg in plaster cast, that is something not everybody can pull off. However, Eric’s attempt to sit down again proves that he has the grace of a crash-landing jumbo jet. He bumps against a chair with his crutches and nearly topples over. Viggo, who is sitting
closest, doesn’t jump up to help him. But he doesn’t trip him up further either, which is a show of
tremendous support, by Viggo’s standards.

“How did that happen in the first place?” Sean enquires when Eric is finally seated.

“A yeti sat on it,” Viggo says sagely.

“Don’t be fucking ridiculous,” Eric replies. He grabs the carton of biscuits lying in front of Viggo
and rips it open. “I got into a fight with a Tibetan Monk.”

Sean nods.

“I hear they are pretty decent martial arts fighters.”

“Told you, you didn’t stand a chance,” Viggo says.

Eric looks affronted.

“Excuse me? I played countless hours of ‘Street Fighter’!”

“Did you ever win?”

“I beat your arse, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, at Mario Kart.”

Before their conversation makes them sound any more like two second formers, Sean tries to pull
it back on track. Considering Eric’s real life driving habits, he has another theory on how the
broken leg came to be anyway.

“Was it a car accident, then?”

“Nah, mate.” Eric shakes his head, then shrugs. “I just slipped and fell.”

Sean makes a commiserating noise, but Viggo purses his lips.

“That is possibly the dullest story I have ever heard.”

Eric leans back in his chair and sighs ostentatiously. Then he puts on a miserable expression and
his voice is a couple of notches higher when he speaks again.

“It hurt like a fucking bitch, and I almost started crying like a little girl.”

Viggo cackles.

“That makes it marginally better.”

Eric shoves another biscuit into his mouth while addressing Sean again.

“Word of advice: If a Sherpa tells you that trainers aren’t the right footwear for climbing a
mountain, listen to the bloke.”

Sean nods his agreement.

“Proper footwear will give you blisters, though.”

Eric laughs again.
“That’s what I told him.”

Sean grins back at him, but then a slight commotion at the door catches their attention. The door is pushed open with way too much force, causing the two new people as well as Cate to jump back. Christopher steps in, like this was the Globe and he was William bleeding Shakespeare. Cate smiles at his entrance but the two NQTs still look slightly confused by so much verve. She just laughs at his (no doubt very elaborate) greeting and leaves the two NQTs in his clutches.

Fleeing the scene with more grace than Sean can usually muster when hiding from Christopher, she comes over to them, wearing a slinky skirt which Sean appreciates quite a bit. She slides into the chair next to him.

“So, they seem nice,” she announces.

“Who?” Viggo asks distractedly, eyes still glued to her knees as she crosses her legs.

Sean rolls his eyes.

“Redhead and Sunshine.”

Cate gives him her look of mildest puzzlement.

“You’ve talked to them already?”

“About them, rather,” corrects Sean.

“I told Sean I’d let him have Sunshine,” Viggo informs her. “I’m generous like that.”

Cate slowly shakes her head and pats Sean’s thigh.

“Sorry, Sean, no deal. I’ll be keeping that one to myself.”

Sean arches his brows, Viggo looks mildly shocked, Eric completely appalled. Cate shrugs.

“He teaches P.E., and I’ve always wanted a personal trainer.” She gives Sean her best smile. “But I’ll put in a word for you with Miranda if you want.”

“Have I ever mentioned that I really like you?” Sean replies with a grin.

“But she isn’t even properly blond,” Viggo protests, looking back and forth between them. “What do you want with her?”

Cate redirects her smile at him. She leans forward, her elbows resting on the table, chin propped on her palm.

“Say, this thing you do, dividing fresh meat amongst you, how did that go last year?”

Sean glances over at Viggo who unsuccessfullly tries to claim back his biscuits. Eric just uses his unnaturally long arms to keep them out of reach, reminding Sean faintly of a patient orang-utan mother with her offspring. Viggo climbs half on Eric’s lap who, due to his cast, can’t get away, and subsequently and with a howl of triumph, he regains ownership of his biscuits. Sean turns back to Cate.

“Yeah, so last year’s division? That turned out different than anticipated.”

Eric looks back and forth between him and Cate with a frown.
“What are they on about?” he asks Viggo, only to add the next second, “Whatever, I don’t give a crap. Vig, forgot to mention, I need your help offing this new bloke.”

Viggo is busy inspecting his booty and finding the box almost empty.

“Yeah, sure,” he agrees distractedly.

Eric laughs gleefully, but Viggo is probably at least partly serious.

“Whyever would anyone want to kill Karl?” asks Cate with mild interest. “We’ve only just met him.”

Eric looks at her like she turned traitor against Queen and Country.

“He’s from New Zealand,” he exclaims, his Melbourne accent broadening further. “For fuck’s sake, he is a bloody sheep shagger!”

Cate scoffs good-naturedly, and Viggo cackles in delight. Sean puts his timetable down and pulls the box with biscuits out of Viggo’s hand. He uses them to wave over the still grumpy looking Karl, a broad and welcoming grin on his face.
Dear Mr B.

Chapter Summary

Letters from Orlando to Sean, 1996-2003

December 1996

Dear Mr B.,

so, it’s December, and for the first time since fuck knows when forever I didn’t have to spend half of it on your detention-sofa because Mr Mortensen, some people are extra-sensitive around the holidays and can’t take a joke. Who’d have thought I actually miss being told off? ‘cause it must be that; my phantom-limb nostalgia thing can’t be due to your hospitality. Now that I am at a safe distance, let me just say that your tea? Not really the stuff of wet dreams.

Anyway. Jolene (my girl-friend. You remember her. She was the one always getting A++ in your A-levels and never getting any detention even though she is a total minx) refuses to make out with me right now because she is writing Christmas cards. No idea why she has to do that on my sofa, probably just because that way she can multitask and write to her Nan AND yell at me that I am ‘a total shithead for writing about wet dreams and snogging to one of our teachers, honestly.’

Orlando Bloom

P.S. Dom is not dead! He showed up around noon the day after, though he claims he can’t remember where he’s been for three days. Good thing I hadn’t gotten around to posting this letter (had to buy an envelope first). Otherwise you’d probably have spent all of your Yuletide season worrying about Dom’s alive-or-dead status, about how I’m faring at uni (well) AND about how to get back at Mr Mortensen and Mr Bana for drinking all your egg nog.

***

December 1997

Dear Mr B.,

so, how disappointed were you when you opened this parcel and there wasn’t a fancy gift in it for you? I bet very. Sorry about that. And also sorry for taking so long to send these books back to you; I hope you haven’t gone and replaced them with new copies. I honestly forgot that I
borrowed them from you, and I only found them again when my mother made me clean out my room back at their house. On Christmas Day. Who the fuck does that?

I guess what I am saying is that I am basically homeless now. That is my sob-story-excuse for taking nearly two years to return your books.

I re-read the Rousseau one again before I put it in the box, and I’m not really sure why I hated it so much back in sixth form. It’s actually a riot and it nearly caused my father to have an aneurism when I kept quoting it at him, also a plus. For some reason he found it insulting that I told him that Rousseau, while writing that book on education, basically dumped all his offspring at the next orphanage. The approval of my chosen classes is still sub-zero, in case you wondered. I mean it isn’t like I said that my father should have done the same or anything.

In lieu of anything fun to do around here, I did all my reading for the next couple of weeks already, and maybe my memory is faulty there, but didn’t you have this book about enlightenment philosophers with illustrations? I think it was blue and yellow, and basically a graphic novel? I remember you brought it to class at some point, and I flicked through it while I was in detention. Could you mail me the title? I’m in the middle of writing a paper about enlightenment and fucking hell, Kant doesn’t make it easy to like him, does he?

Thanks in advance!

Orlando

P.S. Merry Whatever and a Happy New Year, by the way. Has the school burned down to the ground this year because of Mr Hill’s fireworks? Are YOU homeless as well?

P. P.S. I am not actually homeless; I know you worried about that for the last couple of paragraphs, so this is me putting your mind at ease. You’re welcome. I still live in that dumpy flat with Dom, and I think Jolene would let me crash at hers for at least a week before she killed me in my sleep.

***

Valentine’s Day 1998

Dear Mr B.,

I’m sending you back the books on Hume and Locke. Read them both. I presume you only sent me the first one to piss me off? I mean there’s no denying that he was onto something with the whole notion of experience being the sole basis for knowledge, granted (though, in fact, Dom lives to prove him wrong every day. Would it surprise you if I told you that he left the stove on thrice this month already?). But what’s it with his aversion against rationality, seriously? When I got to the bit about all of us basically being bundles of sensations (I KNOW he didn’t put it like that, so don’t bother getting out your red pen), I was very tempted to throw the stupid book into the kitchen fire that my idiot of a flatmate accidentally caused. He was obviously on drugs or something or has eaten some of those pot laced cookies that we all know Mr M has in his desk.

Speaking of Mr M, do you think he’d find it helpful if I got him a copy of Locke’s Letters Concerning Toleration? I’m just kidding. I didn’t read the stuff about religious tolerance; the chapters on his views on the social contract theory are the bomb, though.

I hope you don’t mind if I keep the other stuff you sent a while longer? I didn’t have the time yet to read them – I had a paper to finish on the original fascist Plato, and Jolene had finals and one stupid breakdown after another. Seriously, how do teachers handle all that nervous crying?
Considering what you wrote about Mr Hill, by turning suicidal, I presume. There is no way that Shakespeare war will end with anything less than total annihilation, he knows that, right? I had classes with Mr Depp; he is certifiably insane.

Anyway, basically I spent most of January wanting to ram my head against a wall which is why I didn’t get anything done. Tell me if you need the books back!

Cheers, Orlando

P.S. I hope you appreciated the colour of the envelope btw. The corner shop didn’t have any seasonally appropriate red / heart-shaped ones, so I had to take matters (and a Sharpie) into my own hands.

P.P.S. Is it inappropriate to send you a letter on Valentine’s Day? Jolene says it is, but that’s mostly because she is overly emotional due to too much needless crying slightly annoyed that I didn’t sharpie her one. I mean, people send each other greetings for Jesus’s birthday, so I suppose this should be fine, right?

P.P.P.S. I am pretty sure you know this already – but if you should be siding with Mr Hill in the War of the Demented Thespians, you could tip him off that Mr Depp hides his Rum in his left drawer. Before noon he very definitely doesn’t function without the occasional sip. Just saying.

***

July, 4th, 1998, which is like Christmas for Americans

Dear Mr B.,

I admit straight out that I haven’t finished the books you sent and hope you don’t need them over the summer holidays. Going anywhere fancy this year? I’m gonna attempt to drive through Europe with Dom. It will end with him going missing in the first petrol station store and me mourning his loss in a vineyard in Southern France.

The reason for my lateness with the books is the thing I’m sending you with this letter which I am sure you’ll appreciate because it’s the bomb. It’s a graphic novel about the battle of Thermopylae by Frank Miller, and seriously you need to read it right now. It’s epic. You told us about Leonidas and his three hundred in, what? First year or something? Must’ve been pretty early in any case. I had bloody swords and decapitated Persians all over my textbooks after that, and Mr Lee had one of his usual fits over it. I’m pretty sure he recommended getting me tested for sociopathic tendencies or something. Might’ve been the first time I ended up on your couch, actually.

Anyway, I’m sending this to you because you need to read it and weep with joy. And when you finished with that, you need to forward this to Mr Lee. You’d forever enamour yourself to me if you included the following message:

TOLD YOU IT’S ART, YOU PRICK.

You can keep the two issues – there’ll be a couple more till autumn, if you’re interested, I can get those to you as well.

Cheers, Orlando

P.S. THIS IS SPAAAARTAAAA!!

***

Dear Mr B,

you wouldn’t happen to own a book about the early years of the Russian Socialist movement?

Fucking Commies.

Orlando

P.S. I do own a library card in case you wondered. It’s just that there is not a SINGLE book about the subject that wasn’t written by an avid Marxist with massive brain damage, I swear to Lenin.

***

December 1998

Dear Mr B.,

thank you for both of your letters from last month. What you wrote about the early years of bolshevism seriously cleared up some stuff for me. Mind, I still think you’re massively wrong about the whole thing – though it doesn’t surprise me at all that you’re a Socialist.

The one thing Marx did get right is the bit about religion being the drug of choice for stupid people (paraphrasing here). This morning, I nearly got killed by some lunatic carrying a Christmas tree up the staircase of my house. The entire staircase is about two metres wide, and ever since that incident with Dom and the football, the light on second floor doesn’t work – and the idiot carried his stupid shrubbery SIDEWAYS. With the result that he got stuck. What an absolute surprise. Moron.

What did you call it? The school ‘preparing itself for the onslaught of the season to be jolly’. Onslaught being the key word. And no, I don’t for a single second doubt that you already had to rescue someone from strangling himself with fairy lights and had to send way more than the usual quota to the infirmary due to too many candy canes. It’s just that I don’t believe that it was ‘a distraught first year’ and ‘a horde of fourth years’ but actually Mr M. and Mr Bana. Right?

You must be weeping with joy, the moment the holidays begin and everyone leaves. Is Mr Marsters still ripping off all the decoration the moment the majority of the pupils are gone? As janitors go, he might not be the most competent one (given that we only had ONE working shower for the whole floor for the entire first half of year three), but he got that bit dead to rights.

Dom left to go home day the before yesterday, which means I can finally force myself to finish ‘Capital’ (got distracted by a book about Mao). Hurrah.

Don’t drink too much egg nog!

Cheers,

Orlando

P.S. I can’t believe I almost forgot this AGAIN: I am including the rest of the ‘300’ issues. I have them lying around since October (and Dom temporarily used them as coasters, that’s where the water stains come from) after you said you liked the first two.

***

1/2/1999
Dear Mr B.,

I am writing this on the only piece of paper available to me right now; please just ignore the scribbles on the other side (they are what Dom calls ‘taking measurements’ – don’t ask me why he thinks it necessary to map out our flat, now that we’re moving OUT). Dom left to get some more boxes by which he means he is fuelling up in the pub for round two, and I was just packing up some books when I found half a letter to you.

I’m not including it in this letter because I was being a whiney bitch in it. Blame it on the combined powers of Kierkegaard and Jolene deciding she needed to focus all her attention on becoming a doctor instead of trying to cure me. But really, put most of the blame on Kierkegaard.

To further justify why I am not including the original treaty on Søren and my ex: It didn’t even mention the best part of the story which was how I got ‘Either/Or’.

I’m not sure whether you read it, but the basic idea of it is – as the title suggests – contrasting two different answers to the Aristotelian ‘how should we live’ question: On the one hand you have the bloke who lives his life under the banner of seduction, drama, and beauty. That’s contrasted in ‘Or’; that postulates the concepts of moral, marriage, critical reflection. And as far as approaches to philosophy go, this one truly fucks with your head since Kierkegaard isn’t even attempting to avoid meandering. Makes Kant easy-reading in comparison.

Anyway, you might think that fate is already pointing her finger at me and laughing hysterically for reading a book on seduction and marriage in the first place, and on top of that at the same time that I am being rudely accused of being incapable of romance and whatnot. BUT this is not even the oddest part. The weird part is how I got the book.

So, I’m sitting on a park bench, minding my own business (eating crisps between lectures) when this guy flops down next to me and GIVES me the book. All, you know, these really persistent religious people who force their bibles onto you? Like that. Speaking of bibles, he actually reminded me somewhat of Mr M., what with his hippie idea of a haircut and the wild eyes, but maybe that is just a sign of general fanaticism I automatically associate with Mr M. Anyway, the paperback the guy had with him was so well-read it was pretty much falling apart, and he puts it in my hands, looks me in the eye and tells me ‘this has the answers you’re looking for’ and leaves. Honest to Zeus, I am not kidding. Also, he stole my crisps.

In conclusion, January was the month I looked like I needed saving to mentally-deranged street bums. Way to go, Orlando.

Dom just returned. He is actually less sloshed than I expected him to be, and he demands we try to dismantle the bookshelf NOW. So, I need to close (since I WILL post THIS letter).

Orlando

P.S. I am including ‘Either/Or’. Cause, dude, it has the answers you’re looking for, man. You’re so very welcome.

***

Two days after Valentine’s Day 1999

Dear Mr B.,

I got your letter and your Valentine’s Day card. Really, the card is not creepy AT ALL. But for real now: No time now, will reply properly some time that is later. For now just: Thanks for the
laugh, seriously.

Cheers,
Orlando

***

Saint’s Day of Damian, 1999 (this is not the horror movie Damian, to my utter disappointment, but some guy who gained sainthood for going to Hawaii)

Dear Mr B.,

only, like, two months after the fact, I finally find time to reply to your letter from February (am ridiculously busy since I started working as a student assistant for an insane prick).

First off, I need to tell you that I had a massive fight with Dom because of it. I insisted that the lovingly drawn Valentine’s Day card had to be stuck to our fridge (not for a second do I believe that you ‘bought this from a first year who wants to become an artist’. You got that P.E. teacher mate of yours tanked and forced him to do it.). Dom said that it would ‘scare all the ladies away, man’.

I’m not really seeing the problem there, since Dom is utterly incapable of luring female company into our lair anyway. He usually only gets lucky when some girl takes him home with her like he was some stray cat she found in the gutter. And I, for some reason, find myself in what I presume people call ‘the experimental phase’ of one’s university education; horny guys, I can tell you that much, are not scared off by that wonky looking Cupid on your card.

So, it is still stuck to the fridge, only as a handful of rude comments written all over it by now.

Second off, what happened to the Kierkegaard book ever since you deposited it in the staff loo? Has someone (Mr M.?) taken it for themselves and uses it to read nonsensical bedtime stories to certain other people (you? Mr Bana?)? Has Mr Depp transformed it into a play that no one but he himself can make sense of? Has Mr Hill used it as toilet paper? Or has it, in fact, found its way into the syllabus and you teach it in class now?

I actually borrowed another copy of ‘Either/Or’ from the library (with commentaries) after your letter because I had a knee-jerk reaction of instantly opposing you. But then I didn’t have time because I got into a feud with my ‘Ethics and Economics’ professor (Prof. Neeson is Irish and a cunt – he is also my boss, which is inconvenient) and also I had parties to go to.

But, see, thing is that is pretty much the point I wanted to make anyway. It’s just bullshit to say that the positions of ‘Either’ and ‘Or’ reflect certain times in one’s life. It’s so cheap to explain away hedonism as folly of youth and attributing the opposing view – that of moral responsibility – to a more mature person / old age. (Although I appreciate the way you phrased that as ‘the age of not getting it up’. Kudos for that.)

And that’s my continued issue with Kierkegaard in general, I suppose. Say what you want about all the radical philosophers who have a tendency to force their viewpoint onto you, whether you want it or not. But at least they chose one side and stick to it. Gotta respect that. What Kierkegaard does, just ‘presenting’ the two possibilities in which you can live your life? What use is that? It’s not like the world actually IS like that, like ying and yang isn’t just a novelty trick you print onto your t-shirt as a sort of 5 pound philosophy statement. Here, in the real world, of course I can shag my way through half the college AND take my class on Amartya Sen (got a Nobel Prize in economic sciences last year) seriously. Doesn’t mean I am fucking schizophrenic, does it?
However, thanks for the info on Danish history in the 19th century. I get what you’re saying about Kierkegaard being a seismograph for the zeitgeist of his time (and maybe even quite clairvoyant, concerning the rest of the 19th century), and I agree. – I trust you got all of that from a reliable source (not Mr M.).

Let me repay you – because if my ethics and economics classes (and my nightlife) have taught me anything, then it is that reciprocation is polite – by highly recommending Amartya Sen’s ‘On Economic Inequality’. It will make your socialist heart swell with joy, I think. Sen is also an atheist by the way.

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. How was this year’s open house debacle day? Did Mr Bana throw Mr M. into the pond again? How come that entertaining things like that never happened when I was still attending Jackson College? I’m still not sure I believe your theory that Mr Bana corrupted Mr M.; it’s like you haven’t MET Mr M. I suppose it’s more like evil symbiosis or something?

***

Pentecost 1999

Dear Mr B.,

excuse the scrawl (should bring back memories of my brilliant essays on the nonsensicalness of Leninism in sixth form, right?), I’m on the train to Canterbury. But I just KNOW this is going to be about the only free time I’m gonna have over the next couple of days, so I’ll use it responding to your letter. Once I get off the train, I’ll be too busy not listening to my father asking me what I am planning to do with my life when I finally realised that philosophy is not actually a way to make one’s living. Hurrah for Pentecost and obligatory family visits.

I am sure you’ll appreciate that I used what you wrote on Indian history to declare war on my ethics and economics professor, Mr Neeson. I think he was quite close to clogging me one at the end of one lesson, and considering that he is about 7 feet tall, I’d have ended up in hospital which would have been your fault. Just so you know.

Tragically, your response to my recommendation of Sen’s observations on India’s economy led me down a rather dark path i.e. into the section of our library that houses hippies and Indian philosophy. Since as a teacher you’re obviously all disapproving and whatnot of the whole recreational drug topic, I’ll skip the part where I gain access to very cheap and very good pot thanks to a really hot girl in the Buddhism section. Instead let me tell you about how I nearly got thrown out of the library.

I found this book on Cārvāka philosophy, and it’s too bad that I’m about 1000 years too late to join them, considering they for instance declare the scriptures of Hinduism disjointed blabberings whose sole purpose is to fill the pockets of priests. Clever people, the Cārvākas. What disconcerted me a bit (and will amuse you to no end, I’m sure) is that this book repeatedly compared their version of scepticism to your boyfriend the incoherent druggie David Hume.

Anyway, I nearly got thrown out because I kept laughing out loud, and the stupid librarian afterwards wouldn’t let me check out most of the books I wanted. So while I have Schopenhauer on my list (I laughed my arse off reading his views on the non-existence or inherent evilness of God, back when I was in Mr M.’s A-level. But his ‘Will’ is pretty much a philosopher’s version of a gothic novel – all darkness and instinct and what-have-you. Pretty much all you want to do while reading it is hand the guy a pint and tell him to fucking relax a bit.), he’ll have to wait.
Speaking of bad-tempered philosophers and their home country, did I tell you that I’m most probably going to Germany for half a year? Can’t really recall anymore how that got started, I think Prof. Neeson recommended me, but anyway I got selected for a studentship, which means I’ll be in Munich from September on (if Dom doesn’t chain me to the heater which he threatened to do because he has to find a stand-in flatmate for the time being and says he can’t be arsed). All I know about Munich is that this is where the Nazi movement gained their followers. Not necessarily the best of recommendations.

I’ll have to get off the train in a couple of minutes, so just a brief last thing: Did you ever hear of Eric Shanower? He’s doing a comic series on the Trojan War. Not sure how good it really is, I just got a glimpse of it at a party last week and thought it might interest you.

Cheers,
Orlando

***

First day of summer break (which should be celebrated as a national holiday) 1999

Dear Mr B.,

true beliefs and true statements correspond to the actual state of affairs. That has been quite strongly agreed upon by philosophers starting from Socrates. And like Bertrand Russell famously stated: A statement must have a structural isomorphism with the state of affairs in the world to make it true.

Now I can see you pointing your finger at me and laughing because of fucking course I left out all objections sceptics voiced over the centuries. But let me tell you this: If I showed Friedrich Nietzsche your letter, even HE would put you in a straightjacket.

So basically, thank you for your letter, but there are a couple of things that made me think that your relationship with the truth is like that of the self-proclaimed master of the universe pope to humility:

You claimed
- Mr Bana has a girlfriend.
- Mrs Blanchet actually got those third years to clean out her garden shed to make up for a broken window.
- Mr Lee told a joke.
- Mr M sent greetings.
- Mr Urban forced you to go shopping for a suit with him.

This is what is possibly closer to a sane person’s take on ‘the truth’:
- Mr Bana met a woman in the supermarket, and she maybe considered flirting with him because he is tall and she doesn’t know he is a demented Aussie, being a stranger and whatnot. Then Mr M showed up behind a stack of canned beans on sale like a jack in the box. And the woman thought: ‘Ah, too bad the half-way handsome ones are gay.’ And toddled off to buy ice-cream.
- Mrs Blanchet shut said third years into her garden shed and the broken window was the result of an attempted escape.
- Someone else (you?) made a joke. Mr Lee disapproved.
- Mr M. owns a voodoo doll with my face on it, and the supposed ‘greeting’ was actually a curse, possibly including the words ‘die you faithless heathen, die’, punctuated with needles to the chest.
- I don’t even know Mr Urban in person, but from all you wrote about him I am fairly certain that all suits he owns have the word ‘track’ preceding them.
In conclusion: You’re a lying liar who tells lies.

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. What do you mean, Germany isn’t ruled by the Nazi party anymore??? Thank you SO much for the book on recent German history, I wouldn’t know what I’d do without your guidance and wisdom. I wish I’d have had an A-level teacher like you.

P.P.S. Yes, I am still going to Munich in September. No, I still don’t have a flat. Yes, I did take German for three years. However, all I remember from Mr Parker’s classes is ‘guten Tag’ and ‘diese banane sind im sonderangebot’.

P.P.P.S. I’ll be spending a couple of days in Canterbury with my parents because they say I have to if I want them to pay for aforementioned flat in Germany which I don’t yet have. But after that I’m going to go motorbiking in New Zealand for most of August with my sort of girlfriend (I think I told you about her? The girl with the exquisite weed Zoe? Can’t remember.) and a couple of mates. I suppose I could manage writing you a postcard if you want one.

***

New Zealand (which is not a time, but a place, I know that) 1999

Dear Mr B.,

here’s the promised postcard. I’d say the mountain you can see on the other side is the one we climbed yesterday, but I can’t tell them apart (it’s fairly hilly up here). My trip to Canterbury reminded me that it’s pointless to go there. How the fuck should I know what I am going to NZ is fine so far, the company is good, the weather is shit most of the time.

Cheers,
Orlando

***

August Bank Holiday 1999

Dear Mr B.,

thank you for your letter. And for your concern, I suppose. I shouldn’t have sent that postcard in the first place or write when I’m drunk, and it’s three in the morning. In my defence, I had to go through some lengths to get that stupid thing. You’d think that since pretty much everywhere you look you have the most stunning scenery in front of you, the Kiwis would lead the word market of postcard production, but they don’t.

But I guess, I still should have tossed it; sorry about that. Because it’s not really that bad new, is it, my parents telling me what I am supposed to do with my life. They haven’t changed their opinion for the last two decades either – doctor or lawyer if you ask my father, poet or actor or Peter Pan if you ask my mother.

You’d already told us in class that your Dad owns a fabrication shop, I think. In any case, I knew that before your letter; I don’t know, from when we were doing the Industrial Revolution? Or maybe that’s just my go-to idea when I think of Sheffield. In any case, if you’re trying to tell me that I am supposed to piss off against my father by working in a supermarket or as a semi-professional welder, let me assure you that he’d prefer both over philosophy. So, I win.
Anyway, New Zealand was fantastic; the perfect place for a motorbike trip, I swear. Do you still own that BMW R60 6? That thing is a beast, though the dirt bikes we used were better suited for the terrain. But Essex and Suffolk? Yeah, I can see the appeal of a R60 6 for that. Thanks for your postcard by the by – too bad I only got it after I returned from New Zealand, otherwise I’d undoubtedly have profited a lot from all the helpful insider survival tips your Kiwi mate (was it Mr Urban? His signature is properly scary, I could barely decipher it) had you write down. I’d return the favour by telling you how to fix the starter of his bike on the go, but I suppose that’d be a bit late as well. You got where you wanted to go in the end, didn’t you?

I’ll be leaving for Germany in three weeks, but I can’t tell you my address just yet because I still don’t know where I’m gonna stay, and I suppose not even the organized German postal system will deliver Mail to ‘somewhere in Munich’. I hope your school year starts off better than the last one, preferably without multiple broken bones in the staff and the student body. Fingers crossed.

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. Speaking of journeys (this is not the best segue, be warned), I bought Joseph Campbell’s complete works a week ago. I am not done with it yet, but the concept Campbell proposes is quite interesting (you probably know it) – according to him, all mythic narratives (whether that be religious, mythological or literary ones) are variations of a single great story. So, the journey of Heracles, Jesus, King Arthur, and Han Solo share the same basic pattern; and they all serve pretty much the same purpose, too. – Now, only after I was half-way through with it, I got the distinct impression that I’d read it already. Pretty sure it can’t have been in your class because it has nothing to do with history, but it might’ve been in English Lit with Mr Hill? Would you mind asking him for me – it’s annoying not to know...

***

German Unification Day 1999

Dear Mr B.,

it turns out it IS advisable to have a place to stay before one arrives in Munich, especially if that coincides with Octoberfest (which starts in September, Germans.). I spent interesting two weeks on someone’s couch... Anyway, this is my new address, so you have a place to send your orders of wurst and weizen (which translates to ‘wheat’, but means wheat based beer. Took me a couple of days to figure that out, during which I was a bit puzzled as to how much grain the average Bavarian apparently requires...).

The philosophical faculty easily puts that of my uni to shame, and the lectures and classes I picked are interesting, though Bavarian German and what I remember from Mr Parker’s classes aren’t really compatible. My favourite one so far is on Jürgen Habermas, a post-war philosopher, and the lecturer is actually understandable.

My schedule is fairly relaxed, only Fridays are a bit of a bother because the lecture on Habermas all but coincides with an obligatory one on Schopenhauer and his influence on the 19th century. I either have to leave one early or get to the other late. When I remarked on that, the professor giving the lecture on Schopenhauer told me that it was like that for the students 200 years ago as well; apparently Schopenhauer deliberately scheduled his lectures at the same time as his grand foe Hegel, so students were forced to take sides. Basically, Schopenhauer was a dick.

Makes you wonder how that’d turn out if you applied the same principle for school, doesn’t it? For instance, it’s pretty obvious what to choose if the options are history with you or art with Mr Lee. But how about R.E. with Mr M. or Drama with Mr Depp? Given the choice between
obsessed and mental, I’d probably just sleep in late and skip both.

As it is, I’d very much like to focus on Habermas, mostly because he isn’t a basket case.

Tell me if you want me to send wurst to you (man, I MISS my morning tea, though).

Cheers,
Orlando

***

December 1999

Dear Mr B.,

thank you for the tea! I appreciate it almost as much as the fact that the envelope you sent it in had ‘to occupied Germany’ written on it. It was not awkward AT ALL to pick that up from the post. I presume you packed it while you were drunk or on drugs? Because while the tea is most welcome, I’m not really certain what use I am supposed to have for Mr Hill’s travel guide for Germany from 1975 or the wooden cross that, I have no doubt, was hand crafted by Mr M while he was drunk and / or on drugs as well.

Please pass on my eternal gratitude to Mr Hill and relay to Mr M. that it’s actually forbidden to hang up a cross in one’s classroom in Germany (this country grows on me).

Anyway, I got the kids I’m tutoring in English at the moment to draw you a thank you card in response. The fact that most of the card is dominated by a giant penis is due to the fact that they are 15. I got them to draw it with a Santa hat (because that’s what it is; not a condom), though; I hope you appreciate that.

But it’s the gesture that counts, right, so I am also sending you a can of homemade sauerkraut that I bought at a not at all shady market stand. Share it with your mates, enjoy the ensuing diarrhoea, and merry Christmas.

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. Sorry for not properly responding to your letter from November; I’ve been disgustingly busy. I did start reading your book on the influence of Napoleon on thinkers in the early 1800s, though, so ta for that. I’d really like to pick your brain about some of the details, as well as about Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality and some other stuff. But I have tons of papers to write before my term here is up. Was much easier in school; all I needed to do to directly land on your couch was to piss someone off.

***

Valentine’s Day, 2000

Dear Mr B.,

they don’t celebrate Valentine’s Day here, so I got you this condolence card instead.

I’ll be leaving for the UK in a couple of days, so I’m sending your books back to you. I also included some of mine for safekeeping; Habermas in particular and some others. There are three children’s books in the box as well, that isn’t an accident, they were gifts from the guys I’ve been tutoring. Their fixation on wizards in puberty baffles me some, but I suppose the gesture is sweet.
I haven’t had time to read them, but if you do (or already have; they are quite hyped at the moment), you might be interested to learn that in the opinion of my students – who asked me what boarding school life was like -, you apparently bear close resemblance to someone called McGonagall. And it seems that Mr M is a fellow called Snape.

Anyway, the reason I am sending all these to you: Dom is away for a month on some excursion to Tibet or Siberia or some other place only Geography and Biology people ever go to, and as a result no one is at our flat, so I’ll use you as a post office, I hope that’s all right. I’ll send you the money to forward them to me once I am back in England. Or I can come and pick them up; whichever is more convenient for you.

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. I also put ‘V for Vendetta’ into the box, you can keep it if you want. Not sure whether you read V yet, but you should, it’s brill.

So is Habermas’s ‘Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere’. You should absolutely read it since he reflects on the end of representational culture – e.g. Louis XIV and Versailles – and the beginning and development of the culture of public sphere in the late 1700s and the 19th century. I think you’ll like it not because of the massive historical background he just assumes his reader is aware of (never have I been more thankful for the scary amount of data we had to learn for your tests). He also is a bit of a Marxist since argues that with the growth of mass media, the critical public – basis for a functioning democratic state – was more and more replaced by a passive consumer public.

Now, it can be argued that such a thing as a ‘critical public’ never actually existed in the first place, or – if it did – it was just a group of a very selected few, excluding, say, the poor or women. I suppose it’s quite similar in a way to the idea of a public sphere in Ancient Greece, if you think about it that way.

Anyway, Habermas originally wrote it in 1962 which was of course way, way before even the notion of more interactive media. I think his ‘Theory of Communicative Action’ even more interesting than ‘Public Sphere’, partly because of that, but I can’t send you that one because I still need it for a paper.

Speaking of the interactive media and the 21st century and whatnot, I hope you survived the scare of the Millennium bug all right? Or is the school shrouded in darkness since January, 1st?

***

Carnival Monday (which is apparently a huge thing in some places) 2000

Dear Mr B.,

I came home to a stack of dirty dishes (Dom is a pig) and an overflowing letterbox. There was a truly scary amount of final demands in there. Your letter was actually the only one not harshly pressing for frankly ludicrous sums of money; so thank you for that.

For some reason (Dom is a fucking idiot, THAT is the reason), we don’t have a phone line at the moment (or, in fact, electricity). So I’ll just tell you like this that all of the dates you suggested are fine with me; I’d just like to have my Habermas books back sooner rather than later. AND I’d really like to discuss them with you in person – what you wrote about the internet made me nearly tear my hair out. I’m not even kidding; I read your letter and started tearing at my hair.
I could take the train to Jackson College on the next weekend already, Saturday late afternoon? I’m presuming you still have football practice with your girls’ team, same as ever? But it’s fine if that is too short notice for you. You can mail me the philosophy books instead.

Just drop me a quick note. It’s the same address as before; surprisingly Dom hasn’t burned the house down in my absence. That’s at least something, I guess.

Cheers,
Orlando

***

April Fool’s Day, 2000

Dear Sean,

yes, I do find it at least a little consoling that your girls won that match two weeks ago. You forcing me to do laundry with you was at least for a good cause. Though I’ll have you know that my horrified reaction to having to stuff girls’ footie jerseys into washing machines was not due to me not having been aware previous to that that women sweat and attract mud like everyone else. It’s downright offensive to suggest such a thing, man. I was horrified at the prospect of doing laundry, full stop. Had nothing to do with gender clichés.

I am however, rather mystified that you took Mr Bana as a chaperone after all. Do you expect me to act surprised now that you wrote me that he nearly ran onto the field and all but attacked the ref? Because I could’ve told you that that’d happen. Wait. I DID tell you that.

Greetings from Dom by the way, who actually had to sit down on the floor when I told him about Mr Urban’s mishap that forced him to stay behind. Yes, yes, I know that a sprained ankle isn’t a thing to laugh at, but slipping on a banana peel is just something that doesn’t happen every day. Dom wants to know whether you found the banana flinging culprit yet. His money is on it being Donkey Kong, which I highly doubt. Mine is on Mr Lee. He looks like the person to eat bananas.

Anyway, the reason why I am writing, actually, is I kept thinking about what we discussed regarding Habermas, once I sobered up I mean (seriously, that wine you got from Mr Hill? Where does he get potent shit like that??).

I get what you’re saying about religious tolerance, and I’d be a total idiot to deny that the basis of Western civilisation is a combination of Jewish and Christian ideas. However, there is a point where you stop trying to fix a thing that is broken and just move on. Which is basically what any sensible philosopher has tried to do since enlightenment.

However, my professor back in Germany talked about a recent interview with Habermas that would back you up in a way; if I remember correctly, he stressed the importance of those religious cornerstones for modern society as well.

I still don’t get it. And I don’t think I was imagining the appalled look on Mr M’s face either when he saw me again – religious people don’t like atheists because they remind them that their world view is basically a bunch of very boring and obscure fairy tales. They should let ME teach R.E. for a couple of decades and we’d have way less problems, period.

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. I’m sending you back the first issues of ‘A thousand ships’. I’m not really that big a fan of the classics (tragic, yes, I know. Blame Mr Lee), and the plot unfolds seriously slowly (at that rate,
they’ll NEVER reach Troy), but I can totally see why the details of the artwork made you talk at me about it for half an hour. Shanower’s damn skilled. So, thanks for the loan.

***

Easterbunny Day 2000

Dear Sean,

you know how Mr M. is way, way more clever than you? Hint: It has nothing to do with spiritual beliefs, choice of friends or teaching methods (because holy fuck, how ANNOYING is group work?!). BUT even when I was still in school, Mr M already had a mobile phone and hence was reachable. I mean I have no idea how a. he could afford a mobile and b. who he expected to call him since God, I hear, isn’t too big on the whole concept of conversation being a two-way street. But still.

Full disclosure – I am rather sloshed, and everyone around me has suddenly fallen into a coma or something like that. It’s only three a.m., for fuck’s sake, this is the lamest Easter Party I’ve ever had the misfortune of attending. So, chances are pretty high that I am not posting this letter, but it’s either writing to you or talking to the rather sorry looking cactus on the coffee table (i.e. the only other currently somewhat sentient being in the room).

Reason why I wanted to talk to you (I didn’t phone just now by the way, but this afternoon. I know you don’t appreciate being woken in the middle of the night – it’s the only time I’ve ever really seen you lose your cool actually) – I told you I had a job working for a professor, right? I picked that up again, once I returned from Germany, and it was a bit of a surprise, actually, because I’d expected for Neeson to find someone else while I was away, but he didn’t. So, a day before our Easter break, he calls me into his rooms (which, by the way, look more like a boxing gym than a professor’s office. I’m not sure what he does there in his free time, and I am afraid to ask. Irish people are a strange bunch.). What I expected was a telling off for turning his freshers against him (his own fault; why does he give me a bunch of them to tutor if he doesn’t want me to explain to them why Adam Smith is an idiot?). But far wrong. He sits me down and asks me what I wanted to do after graduation. And before I can answer the usual stuff like ‘join the revolution’ or ‘sleep for a year’, he says I should consider doing a PhD with him. I must’ve looked like he was propositioning to me or something, cause then he just laughed, sent me to fetch him the usual gazillion books from the library and told me to ‘think about it’.

Think about it, my arse. I haven’t even graduated yet, for fuck’s sake. And though I know I should do that some time in the next couple of years (yesterday, if you ask my father), that’s about ALL I know about the not so distant future.

I think my best option at the moment is to never again show up to work, quit uni, and live in a barrel (possibly under a bridge, because a barrel might be an all right accommodation when you live in sunny Greece, but the weather is shit here, and I’d need more shelter).

I’m not asking you for advice, mind. You’re absolute rubbish at giving advice. Last time I asked you, you told me I should become a snake-milker or David Hasselhoff. If I’d done that, I’d be dead by now, undoubtedly because of venom and/or sharks.

I’m not really sure what the point of this letter is. Yet another reason why I’m annoyed that you didn’t pick up your phone. Ranting on paper is stupid.

Anyway, I guess the reason why I am writing to you is, in case you never hear from me again: Then there’s a good chance that I stupidly agreed to Neeson’s suggestion, and since everyone knows that ‘do a PhD’ is a euphemism for ‘become a submissive slave for several decades’, I am
probably chained up in a dungeon somewhere. So, just fyi.

I am going to have another beer now and chat up that cactus.

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. So, apparently I AM sending this letter. Consider this a sign of bravery. Or a cry for help re: my future dungeon situation. Or possibly my rather self-involved arrogance thinking it has too clever a beginning to deserve being tossed.

***

Pentecost 2000

Dear Sean,

how DID they allow someone like you to become a teacher? Bad enough that you spend most of your time on the phone laughing at me, but I put that down to progressing dementia and/or alcoholism. But a self-help book that you obviously stole from the school library?

I spent a good two days pondering how anyone is friends with you. But then I discovered the whatever-you-call-it, the borrower’s history in the book. Mind, I still don’t know how anyone is friends with you, since obviously you’re the person to expose Mr M and his search for spiritual guidance your mates to ridicule, but I laughed for an hour straight anyway (which btw, caused the entire compartment of the train I was sitting in to think that I was mental. So thank you for that as well.).

I’m sending you the book back, but I am afraid you can’t return it to the library since I made a few modifications with a Sharpie. On the other hand, I am pretty sure that future borrowers will appreciate the abbreviated read; I cut it down to all the sections that were helpful and what do you know, only three sentences remained. You’re welcome.

While you were busy stealing things from the library, I actually had two epiphanies.

The first mostly revolves around graduating next winter, but that’s the less important one since a. I had to do it some time anyway and b. I think the main hurdle is all that fucking paperwork that apparently involves.

Epiphany No 2: I thought of another solution for your throttle response problem – aside from dumping your BMW for a new bike, that is. Now, you said you replaced the spark plugs and we checked the filters together back in March, so neither can be the problem. But you might want to get a new acceleration cable. I’ve seen rust causing problems similar to the ones you described. You should definitely check that before you set off for France and never get there. Mind, replacing that cable can be a bit tricky, but if you want, I can do it for you or talk you through it on the phone. Or you can stop relaying on slave-labour anymore and actually take your bike to the local garage.

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. Take your bike to Bettany’s, NOT to McAvoy’s, if you go with garage service. I wouldn’t let anyone at McA.’s even near a first year’s tricycle.

***
Dear Sean,

thank you for your postcard from London. It was a tad redundant, like you said, since we met anyway. Also, I do find it slightly weird that you didn’t write it in one go, but it took you three attempts. One might think you didn’t have a minute for yourself during a class trip. If one – namely I – hadn’t spent an entire afternoon in a pub with you without even a glimpse of a student. Well, apart from Emilia Fox, granted. I am still baffled by the amount of details she unloaded on you. Who wants to know that kind of stuff about their pupils?! Please tell me that a. this isn’t normal and b. I didn’t do that when I was still in school. If I did, I need to shoot myself. But I THINK I’d remember telling you in detail about my first time with ‘that bastard’ (insert equivalent to Emilia Fox’s no-good ex here), especially if that included a pregnancy scare.

I’ve been wondering about that before, actually. Do you, like, have a list in the staff room with ‘specialties’, sort of like ‘if you have a student who has problem a, send him to colleague b’ or something? Because no offence, but take Mr Bana for instance. He has the empathy of a tadpole where people who aren’t in their late forties and called Mr M. are concerned, doesn’t he? You can’t possibly send any kid in need for counselling his way. The only thing he’d do is show the kid how to write ‘boobs’ with his calculator. So while you hand out tissues to his pupils, does he do your share of report filing or something?

I enjoyed tutoring those kids back in Germany, and it didn’t even matter to me that their English was crap and their understanding of the books they had to read was on the same level as Mr Lee’s grasp of the concept of humour. But I didn’t have to sit through them pouring their hearts out to me, did I?

I mean I reckon I have a halfway good understanding of the basics of philosophy by now, so much that I suppose I could actually teach some of it without sounding like Mr Depp aka The-Nonsensical-One. But I would be at a total loss as what to say to someone like Emilia that wouldn’t make her cry even more. Jolene used to say that I use up an awful lot of words to say fuck all when it matters. Mind, she usually said that when I’d proven her wrong about something and she was pissed about that and played the ‘you don’t love me’ card but still. So somehow, I doubt that quoting Bertrand Russell at a teenager helps with heartache. ‘To fear love is to fear life’ is, in essence, better suited to be printed onto t-shirts for hippies, I reckon.

Speaking of Russell, I grudgingly acknowledge that you were right about Hume’s influence on him. Also, I think I am in danger of becoming one of those students who never actually graduate because they keep picking up book after book, and 100 years later someone accidentally stumbles upon their mummified corpse in an abandoned section of the library. Because while I SHOULD focus on finishing uni next winter, all I have been doing for the last two months is read book after book written by and about Russell (and he isn’t even part of ANY of my upcoming exams).

I think I told you that the only reason I WAS in London in the first place was to hunt down a rare essay on Russell’s ‘Why I am not a Christian’, didn’t I? Well, since then I’ve read most of the more mainstream stuff he wrote on language (and, following up on that, a whole bunch of Wittgenstein as well – that was when I got actually got myself locked in the library by accident). But I think you might be less interested in that than in his thoughts on society ---

Ha, I just spent half an hour going through my notes from your history A-level (which include a HORRIFIC amount of written conversations on the margins between Dom and I about the most interesting subjects by the way. For instance, do you remember a lesson you gave on the Suffragettes? I do remember that you started it with ‘Mary Poppins’ for some reason, but while I have three pages of notes on Emily Pankhurst etc., I must’ve copied all that from the blackboard on autopilot because I can’t remember A SINGLE THING. Instead, apparently Dom and I were
focussed on discussing the physical qualities of Maddy Weston sitting in front of us - don’t think I
don’t see the irony there.). Anyway, in those notes I found a photocopy of a speech from Russell
re: women’s right to vote. So THAT was where I knew him from!

I suppose that means I don’t have to actually write down what would undoubtedly have become a
love declaration to Russell, his atheism, and his damn sound view on pretty much all social topics.
So, to reduce that to just one thing then, I conclude this with a quote that SHOULD be printed
onto t-shirts and be worn by not just hippies but everyone: ‘Religion is based primarily and mainly
on fear. A good world needs knowledge, kindliness, and courage; it does not need a fettering of
the free intelligence by the words uttered long ago by ignorant men.’

Mind, I doubt that your Emilia Fox would find that all that helpful. Or, come to think of it, Mr M.

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. I forgot to ask about your bike last time we talked: Did you solve that throttle response issue
yet? Call me, and I’ll explain to you again what to do.

***

John Locke’s birthday, 2000

Dear Sean,

just like I promised on the phone five minutes ago (and you didn’t believe me that I would), I am
sending you the postcard I bought for you in Italy and forgot to write (I DID BUY IT THOUGH,
SEE). AND I am including a copy of my essay on ‘The Law of Peoples’, to you by now also
known as ‘Why John Rawls is not the cunt my economics professor makes him out to be’ or
‘How I nearly made Prof. Neeson punch me’.

There. You owe me five quid now.

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. Don’t be too hard on the kids next week. They want school to start again even less than you
do.

***

Hobbit Day (bet you didn’t know that existed, huh?), 2000

Dear Sean,

I bought a book on curious holidays which is why I know that someone decided that September,
22nd was the perfect day to celebrate tiny people with hairy feet, like, say, Dom.

I’m telling you this because you complained that you didn’t know what to give Mr M. for his
birthday next month and deemed my idea of a Jesus costume inappropriate. I was in my favourite
used books bookstore (have I told you about that by the way? I think if you ever entered it, you
would NEVER leave. They have three shelves of graphic novels alone. Three. And one for
Napoleonic Era stuff. At least one third of the books doesn’t smell too mouldy). Anyway,
originally I was there because the owner called me about a rare edition of John Stuart Mill’s On
Liberty since I’m writing an essay on Mill in the age of New Media.
I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that, by the way, since it kind of relates to the discussion we had about Habermas and his theory of the change of the public sphere. Mill states that ‘the sole end for which mankind are warranted in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self protection. But in the part which merely concerns him, a man’s independence is, of right, absolute’. Wouldn’t you agree that in the age of the internet (where the idea freedom of speech gains a whole new meaning) Mill’s thoughts on liberty and censorship are –

Goddamn. I got interrupted (Dom needed me to nip out and buy condoms for him), and when I re-read what I wrote, I had do bang my head on my table repeatedly. This letter has NO structure whatsoever, and I am pretty certain that you thought you were witnessing me having a stroke or something. But since it’s late, and I honestly can’t be bothered to start over, let me try and salvage at least this:

The book about curious holidays that I bought: I found out for you that while Mr M.’s birthday only coincides with the National Cook Day (BORING), it is preceded by Evaluate Your Life Day and followed, on the 21st of October, by Count Your Buttons Day. I am sure you can come up with a birthday gift, now that you have this valuable information.

Books on Napoleon and the graphic novels: The shop owner gave me a list of the books (written on his TYPEWRITER which I am sure will make you very happy) that I’m including.

Mill and the internet: Like I said, I’d like to discuss that with you, but it probably make more sense to do that on the phone or – fittingly – via email. My address is lando1978@compuserve.com (Dom set that up for me. My best friend doesn’t know in which year I’m born.).

Dom and condoms: He didn’t need them to have awkward sex with some unlucky fresher. He needed them to waterproof the electronic gadgets he is taking on his next geographers-in-the-wilderness (aka Kent) trips. I know you can sleep better now.

Namaarie (which is Cheers in Elvish since it’s Tolkien People Day and all),
Orlando

***

Mr M.’s birthday, 2000

Dear Sean,

I’m not really a fan of holistic theories, but

I thought about what we discussed some more before we got interrupted, well, actually I thought about the cause of the interruption itself

Just a couple of things about Habermas that I wanted to bring up before your life got taken over by a crying first year

Seriously, this is the fourth attempt to start this stupid letter. Since when do I need to write a fucking DRAFT to get my thoughts in order? This is ridiculous.

So, basically, the gist is this:

You sounded worn out on the phone, and it was weird. I don’t know how to respond to that kind of weariness.

I spent the first five minutes after you hung up all but thanking deities I don’t believe in that we got interrupted because you had to go and provide a handkerchief and tug that boy back into bed
or whatever it is you do when homesick kids curl up on your doormat. Then I realised that your borderline disillusionment and the existence of homesick poltergeists might form a causal relationship. Then I spent about a day trying to remember whether any of my favourite philosophers ever wrote something about children with overly developed tear ducts missing their mommy or boarding schools. Unsurprisingly, I drew a blank.

The thing is that I really don’t GET homesickness. Honestly, when I first came to Jackson College, I hated the fact that I had to share my space with other people, particularly if said people snored or constantly farted in their sleep. I also hated most of the food, having to clean my own room, and having to turn in at 9 p.m.; and during my second year I spent an entire term fiercely hating that punk who regularly beat me up and kind of extended my list of people I’d like to see dead over the next couple of years. But the point is, I wasn’t homesick.

Now, Dom says that he spent about a night a week feeling extremely sorry for himself during his first term at J.C. (I’m not sure I’m supposed to tell you about the snotty tears he shed). But he got over it.

I’m not trying to be cruel. Boarding school can be a shitty choice for a kid, and maybe the kid you’re worried about will tell his psychologist 20 years from now that this experience is what scarred him for

But I don’t think pity or too much compassion is in order or actually helpful

But to tell you the truth, what really sort of leaves me dumbstruck is how much you take this to heart and

Shit. Mental constipation again. This is what you get when I’m trying to be helpful. I apologise for this letter.

Back in school, I didn’t miss my mother or my father, not once, nor did I ever wish I was back at their house. And I don’t think too close a bond to one’s parents is a good thing tbh. Arriving at J.C. may feel like getting pushed into the deep end, yeah, but it forces you to pull yourself together unless you want to drown.

So unless they are calling me or I have to go and visit them, I really don’t give a shit about what my parents think about me or the choices I make, and I haven’t for ages. That’s the upside of boarding school. Not being tied down by family relations. At least that’s how I see it.

Dom says hi, by the way. He came in just now to ask me why I was sitting alone in the kitchen, laughing to myself. I explained it to him, and he agrees that what I wrote just now, that speech about the kill-or-cure advantages of boarding school life? Maybe it’s not exactly the thing to say to little Jamie Franks when you open the door to him next time. While inhaling about a pound of kippers, Dom suggested to shorten it to ‘just suck it up, you muppet’. Not sure whether he meant you and your job-weariness or Jamie Franks and his mommy-issues with that, but it proves that Dom would be even more shit at counselling than I’ve just proven myself to be.

Anyway, I hope tonight is less about duties as a housemaster and more about drinking loads of free birthday booze at Mr M.’s birthday bash. Please give him my regards and tell him that I was THIS close to getting him a pope bobble-head figure, but then I spent the money on a book on Nietzsche. – You need to tell me what you bought him in the end!

Cheers,
Orlando

***
December 2000

Dear Sean,

man, I can’t even remember when I last wrote to you. Seems like picking up the phone is much more my thing than picking up the pen.

But I FINALLY managed to collect the books you wanted, so that hopefully they’ll arrive before the holidays start. That way you have some fun things to read about decaying corpses on the fields of Waterloo and whatnot, if your thing with that hot mom falls through. (And before you try and deny that last thing and attempt to tell me that you don’t think of Janice Miller’s mom that way? You do know that we had bets on who you’d hook up with next, when we were in your A-level, right? I won my weight in beer once when you went out with Julia Jansen’s mother. Cheers for that btw.)

Must close now, gotta be at work in twenty minutes. Talk to you soon.

Orlando

P.S. Merry Mr.-M’s-favourite-person’s birthday by the way.

P.P.S. Before I forget: I’ll only be at my parents’ for the obligatory two days during the winter holidays and free after that, if you want to meet up. I can do J.C., Yorkshire, or London, whatever is convenient for you.

P.P.P.S. I’m also including a brilliant book on Rawls I read over the weekend. You should definitely give it a go, it will make your socialist heart swell with joy.

***

My birthday, 2001

Dear Sean,

so, I actually did end up going to Israel for ten days. I think I told you the reason - my boss, Prof. Neeson, is here to receive an honorary doctor and decided last minute that he DOES someone to carry his luggage, organize his life and whatnot. It’s not necessarily the ideal time to roam about Jerusalem, five minutes before graduation, granted. But that way, you get a postcard, and it’s not like I can’t cram whilst sitting in a café here instead of the library back home.

Cheers,

Orlando

P.S. Thought some more about what you said about me and teaching a couple of months ago, and how there might be a chance that that wouldn’t end with multiple homicide. Will ponder some more over disgustingly strong coffee if not too busy flirting with Hebrew grad students called Eva.

***

In the middle of fucking exams, 2001

Dear Sean,

just a short note to say thank you for the supplies. Pretty sure I don’t believe you when you say that two kilos of sugar are government approved cram nutrition, but it is as much appreciated as the bunch of graphic novels, even if I have no fucking time to read them atm.
Mind, am faring better than half of my fellow students who seem to think that daily breakdowns are helpful (which I doubt they are). Am avoiding them by mostly frequenting the library at night; the night porter is my new best friend, though he doesn’t share his coffee.

Anyway, talk to you soon. I fucking hate exams.

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. Too bad about Janice Miller’s mom. Want me to forward you the email address of one or two of my acquaintances from Jerusalem to you? Might be a bit young for you, though. And the wrong sex, mostly.

P.P.S. By the way, I nearly got into a fistfight with someone from the job centre when I went there to get information about teaching courses. The woman insisted it wasn’t even possible to do a PGCE in philosophy (which is idiotic in itself since I know someone from Plymouth who is currently doing just that). When I told her that, she replied that it would be way more intelligent to pick another subject – and I’d even have been fine with that, since neither history nor citizenship would be that bad. But guess what SHE said? She had the absolute audacity to suggest that I should do it in R.E. IN FUCKING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION. Because ‘philosophy and R.E. that’s really very close together, young man’. I did not punch her. I told her that philosophy and R.E. were about as close together as my brain and my arsehole and serve about the same purposes. She invited me to leave. Stupid cow, honestly.

Anyway, I’ve been spending time I should be spending on my exam on thinking about which core subject to choose (or whether to move to Plymouth). I’m not gonna ask you which you’d advise me to take because I know the answer. The real question is which I can later re-brand into philosophy-through-the-backdoor.

***

Two weeks before that idiotic graduation ceremony, 2001

Dear Sir,

since you put in a written complaint – if your rude letter qualifies as such (what happened to your aversion against curse words, I wonder) – because I failed to invite you to the shindig, I bought this card for you. They did not have any really appropriate ones in the shop, which is why I bought this one, congratulating myself to graduating.

So, if you want to come, come. I doubt there will be booze aside from cheap bubbly, if past functions are anything to go by, the food will be horrid, and my parents might make an appearance (though all bets are off on that).

If all that is not putting you off, you can RSVP with the second card (again, nothing fitting in the shop, hence the ‘Oh joy, it’s a boy!’ theme). DO NOT DARE TO BRING MR. M. I mean that. I will hurt you.

Orlando

P.S. I am also including a note Dom wrote for you. If you still have difficulties deciphering his handwriting (as one does), it reads as follows: DEAR MR B, LANDO WILL CRY IF YOU DON’T SHOW. NO PRESSURE; THO. DOM. Bless the fucking cunt.

***
Dear Sean,

thank you for your letter, your congrats on the PGCE place, but esp. the detailed recollection of this year’s open door day. I hope you don’t mind that I let Dom read the school bits – he needed a good laugh, and, more importantly, I needed a break from his crying over his breakup (I could’ve told him beforehand that a woman named Evangeline is too high-maintenance for him, but does he ever listen to me? Of course not.).

He wants me to relay to you that you might want to consider a career change and become a sitcom writer instead of a teacher, and I second that. We got particularly invested in the supporting cast; Dom’s fav were Mr and Mrs Hill, their attempts to get pregnant, and Mrs Blanchet’s totally grossed out reaction to that. I preferred Mr Urban’s and Mr Lee’s feud regarding whether or not tracky bums are appropriate for contact with parents.

Speaking of careers, remember that I told you that Prof. Neeson was actually bummed when I told him that I’d try my hand at teaching? Seems like I hadn’t made it clear enough that there was NO WAY IN FUCKING HELL that I would be his work slave for another two years or however long it takes you to write a doctoral thesis in philosophy. Or he just forgot about it. Anyway, when my last day of work came round, he was all wide eyed and surprised like that was the first time he ever heard of it. But then he ended up giving me sage advice (something about not letting kids with rabies bite me, I think), and a book as a gift. On the Marquis de Sade.

I told you that Dom wants to go into teaching as well, right? Or didn’t I? In fact, I think I DIDN’T tell you because I have no recollection of you laughing at me for an hour or so... Anyway, he applied even before Christmas (first time Dom was on time for anything), but he opted for the more hands-on way, mostly because that way he gets a salary straight off and can pay off at least some of his dept and his bookie (that would be me) won’t bust his kneecaps.

I applied for a sort of prep course that starts next month, because I figured that might give me a head start for when the proper thing starts in September. However, the guy who gave the introductory talk wouldn’t stop going on about the awesome insights into every day school life we were gonna get to ‘get face to face with today’s youth’. You may have guessed that after that talk, I regretted my choice of profession already. I may or may not have made retching noises during his speech.

You asked about my parents’ reaction (am back with them for two days atm). It might put an end to your sleepless nights of worrying about my wrecked homelife when I tell you that they didn’t disown me nor did they try to send me to one of those reformation camps the Americans have for fat people and homosexuals. Actually, I’m not even sure it even registered with my father, since he was too busy being pissed off about how the gardener ruined the lawn (the horror), and all my mother asked was whether I would teach ACTING. (Before you ask, yes, those are the same parents who, for the last four years, bitched about how studying philosophy was pointless... by the way, you owe me five quid. I told you only one of them, if at all, would come to my graduation thing, didn’t I?).

I am required to show my face at the dinner table now.

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. (later) Still not disowned. Possibly just because I am an only child and my father thinks charities are even less deserving.
National Day of France, 2001

Dear Sean,

I’m glad to hear the books on German and French Enlightenment were of use to you. After sending them to you, I remembered reading an essay on Diderot and the French Revolution a while back, and I’m including a photocopy. It’s not too complex imo, so I think that might be more appropriate for your pupils than the books? I gave one by the same author to a group of freshers Prof. Neeson had me supervise, and they struggled a bit but got through it in the end. Let me know how it goes if you use it!

Cheers,
Orlando

Maria Montessori’s birthday, 2001

Dear Sean,

would you please relay to Mr M. that I am deeply touched that he got me a graduation present (Even though it arrived about half a year late. I graduated in spring, and it’s the end of August, for fuck’s sake.). However, I do take offence, considering the nature of said gift, and I blame you.

Now, I appreciate it that you didn’t actually bring him to the ceremony. BUT in the short note that Mr M attached to his gift, he said that he bought it after talking to YOU. What on earth made either of you think that I’d want a book on Kierkegaard and religion?!

Yeah, yeah, I get that it was supposed to be a clever way of telling me that I have entered a new phase in life. But honestly, Kierkegaard’s proposal that of the assumed three stages of life, the religious one is the last and highest? Mind, he isn’t wrong in his criticism of Hegel’s idealism, I give him that, but his proposed ‘leap of faith’? Ludicrous.

I was this close to sending Mr M. my copy of Feuerbach’s ‘Essence of Christianity’. Not only does Feuerbach do a much better job at taking apart Hegel, he also reasons that in the consciousness of the infinite, the conscious subject has for his object the infinity of his own nature. That makes God nothing but the outward projection of a human’s inward nature. I swear to Nietzsche that I will make ALL my future pupils learn Feuerbach’s main theses by heart, just so they can spit them in the face of religious fanatics.

Anyway, I am not attaching ‘Essence’ after all because I fear that Mr M. might burn it or something. As soon as I find an affordable whip, I’ll get that for Mr M. instead since he still seems to get off on self-flagellation (Kierkegaard droning on and on and ON about sin makes me want to whip HIM, tbh).

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. Remember what I told you about Dom stuffing a crayon into his left nostril because a 12 year old dared him to? Dom received a holiday postcard from said kid this morning on which the boy told him that Dom is a. his role model and b. the best teacher ever. I fear for the future of this nation.

P.P.S. How come I didn’t get a postcard from Spain from you???
P.P.S. Good start next week. Fingers crossed that not too many of your new first year pups have a mental breakdown in the first ten days. I myself don’t plan on having one, but that may change once I have put into action what we theorized about for the last couple of months now.

Forget the last bit. I just remembered that you made me promise to visit you before school starts again. Or was that just you being traumatized from Mr. Bana’s birthday bash? In any case, call me when you get this.

***

Guy Fawkes Night, 2001

Sean,

thanks for the talk. I mean it; saved me from going mental and/or questioning my aptitude for this job even more. I appreciate it.

Orlando

***

December 2001

Dear Sean,

I swear, I had already written the date onto this card when my computer told me that I got mail from you. AND we spoke two hours ago, so this postcard now is kind of the written equivalent to mutual knock down ginger (speaking of, did I ever tell you that when we were second years, Elijah, Dom, and I spent our winter holidays playing k.d.g on Mr Lee’s door? Good times.).

BUT it’s three days before the randomly allotted date of birth of one rather notorious cult leader called Jesus Something, and I bought this train wreck of a greeting card from an obviously artistically challenged pupil especially for you. Matthew calls it ‘The birth of the saviour’ and ignored my suggestion to re-name it (more aptly) ’Massacre in the labour ward’.

So merry Christmas and sorry again I can’t make it this year – though I have to say that I prefer chaperoning accident-prone teenagers on their skiing trip to having to eat Mr Bana’s fruitcake again.

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. This is probably redundant and waste of a perfectly good piece of additional paper (ignore the notes on the back, I didn’t have a clean one) because I will probably email you anyway, but I am already in bed and can’t be bothered to get up again.

After our conversation about your football teams and the issues that arose because the girls are way more successful than the boys, I remembered that I’d been meaning to read a book by Judith Butler. I got it last year when I wrote a paper on Derrida, but I never got around to reading it. I did now – most of it, anyway – which is why it is now 4.30 a.m. It’s impossible to put down.

In a nutshell, Butler theorizes that gender as well as sex and sexuality are performative; being repeated over and over again, they construct what she calls ‘regulative discourses’ within a society which then decide what is socially permitted, acceptable, right and are thus disciplinary techniques. As I’ve said, she doesn’t only state this for gender categories but for biological sex as
well. Contrary to the position of most feminists, she argues that the sex is just as much culturally constructed by regulative discourse as gender is – attributing a massive importance to sexual characteristics as defining ones means reinforcing a binary view of the world (as in: male/female) instead of challenging it.

Now, the issues that some of your football lads have with the success of the girls’ team obviously has something to do with stereotypes; that much is commonplace, I suppose. Isn’t the whole reason for the problem the division into a male and a female group itself? (For the moment ignoring the additional issues of teenagers generally being jealous, hormone whipped weirdos). What you should do, is have them try out for one team instead of two. Problem solved. Also, additional bonus, Mr Lee WILL suffer a heart attack if you also suggest communal showers as well.

Shit, I have to be in class in three hours.

***

Squirrel Appreciation Day 2002 (yes, that’s a thing)

Dear Sean,

sending you back the books on how to become a good dictator teacher. Thanks for your notes on progress assessment again, though I have to repeat that I enjoyed your recollection of Mr Hill’s views on Ofsted even more (forgot to ask: Did you report him to Mr Mc Kellen for obvious anarchistic tendencies after that?).

I’m including the book on behavioural management that Viggo forced onto me during my visit in autumn. Before you return it to him (thanks in advance for the delivery service), I highly recommend leafing through it. Viggo (and I suspect his Australian significant other) took the time to litter the pages with sticky notes, pointing out all the kinds of disruptive behaviours that should be named after me. Please tell him/them thanks from me, haven’t had that good a laugh in a while.

Also, I got a used copy of Butler’s ‘Excitable Speech. A politics of the performance’ for you. It focuses on the socio-political consequences of hate speech, and I think you might find the read more up your alley than her ‘Gender troubles’; though I still maintain that that one is really the one to read and you’re missing out. In fact, I’m also including an article on that subject that I insist you read (and afterwards admit that you were wrong and I was right), written by Joan W. Scott.

‘Gender: A useful category of historical analysis’ is basically Butler’s theses applied to historiography and historical sciences in general. Considering you call yourself a historian, it might spark your interest. While Scott doesn’t explicitly cite Butler, she nevertheless argues in a similar way: For instance, she says that by simply trying to add ‘the women’s perspective’ to history (which generally is ‘history of the white male’), you perpetuate a binary code of male/female and assume said the categorisation of ‘male/female’ is relevant for each and every historical process, which might very well not be true. – My summary might be a bit too poignant tbh; to find out whether or not it fits her reasoning (and whether she has a point or not), you’d have to read it for yourself. – See how I tricked you into that just now? Hah.

Last but not least, I managed to photocopy the material on Greek philosophy, dumbed down for 13 year olds, that you asked for. Hope it’s useful to you.

All that stuff out of the way: I realised today that if the Marquis de Sade wanted his own personal army, he would’ve recruited a bunch of fifteen year olds. The Y10 I’m currently teaching is an assortment of sadists.

We were debating whether or not Socrates, the ‘gladfly of Athens’, was rightfully accused of
corrupting the youth of the city. Natasha (I told you about her; the one whose tongue is equally studded as it is sharp) said that the Socratic Method is really just more or less thinly veiled manipulation, and the state was right to off Socrates. The relationship between teacher and pupil is inherently complementary, not symmetric, since the former always has the advantage of more knowledge and experience. Thus, all conclusions to which the pupil seemingly comes on his own is inherently a result of the way the teacher asked his questions, making him one massive manipulator.

The next ten minutes consisted of a shouting match between members of Team Natasha, aka the ‘Off with his head’ fraction, and Team ‘Socratic Method FTW’ whose believes are best summed up with Norman’s words – ‘shut your fucking trap, you fucking mong, or I’ll fucking shut it for you’.

Anyway, before they could turn to physical violence (something which my supervisor would frown upon, I think), we took a vote as to whether or not Socrates can be considered a corrupter of youth. Landslide win for Team Natasha, not all too surprisingly.

Somewhat naively, I suppose, I then asked what do with the convicted felon. Now, the Greeks with their poison hemlock have nothing on this Y10. These are my top three of how to get rid off an enemy of the state:

#3 – Bury him on the beach with only his head sticking out and let him enjoy the tide coming in. Bonus points for turtles munching his ears and nose of in the meantime.
#2 – Pull his innards out and then strangle him with them (rather creative if not necessarily medically possible)
#1 – Dress him in a West Ham jersey, send him to the Den in Millwall and let the Bushwackers deal with him.

We agreed on the last one, partly because then those fucking hooligans would finally have something useful to do. Whatever you might want to say against them, that Y10 surely is practical. Pretty sure you’ll agree with that reasoning.

Dom says hi btw. He has THE most horrible rash btw. Took him a field trip with his Y6 to find out that he is madly allergic to poison ivy. His hands look like he put them in a meat grinder.

Gotta go, tons of stuff to do.

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. If you want to chat, remember that I’m away for that seminar the whole next week, yeah? Will be back on Saturday.

***

Two weeks after Valentine’s day, 2002

Dear Sean,

you just be glad I have a solid personality and whatnot. Otherwise, between you and the staff of my current placement school, I’d go schizo. I mean I spend all day with people who basically have broomsticks up their arses – SUCH a difference to my first school, I am still baffled – and then I come home to find this so-called Valentine’s card from you in the mail. Honestly, if _I_ were to have, say, my Y8 draw pictures of the torture and subsequent demise of St. Valentines, I’d probably get fired. And you call that ‘a morning well spent’.
I do appreciate the spare card you sent. I gave it to Billie (Piper, my fellow trainee; not Dom's weird Scottish mate) because it’s cheaper than flowers. She felt properly wooed, of course, and it brightened her mood considerably after that dickhead of a headmaster gave us a lecture on how to dress appropriately for our jobs in the future – and not like a streetwalker and a funeral home apprentice. I trust you to figure out which of the two was aimed at me and which at Billie.

Anyway, a week here and I already know that I will definitely not apply for a teaching position at this school once my PGCE is done in June; as far as epiphanies go, that’s at least something. I’d rather teach preschoolers how to shove crayons into orifices.

Cheers,
Orlando

***

Easter Sunday, 2002

Sean,

just so you have this in writing because I am no Welsher: I am prepared to lug around your girls’ footie gear for all of next Saturday; a bet’s a bet after all. However, if you have tricked someone else into doing it for you (like, Mr Urban for instance), I volunteer to stand at the sidelines and shout abuse at the ref. Or at you. Whatever floats your boat.

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. Manchester United is still the better team. You were just lucky.

P.P.S. Is there a chance that you still have my copy of Carver’s book on postmodern Marx? I searched everywhere for it and can’t seem to find it...

***

Your birthday, 2002

Dear Sean,

first of all, happy birthday. I hope Mrs Blanchet baked you a cake again, preferably without a file in it this time that accidentally removes one of your fillings. About my gift: If you like the book, you’re welcome. If you don’t: I haven’t actually read ‘Gates of Fire’ and thus can’t say if Pressfield depicts the battle of Thermopylae correctly. Please direct your complaints directly at the author.

Cheers,
Orlando

***

Orgasm day (May, 9th for you), 2002

Dear Sean,

I read on the web this morning that a small town about 1500 miles from Rio de Janeiro declared today the day to celebrate orgasms. Apparently there is a parade and everything. Just fyi.
As for something entirely different aka the actual reason for this letter, I hope you don’t regret offering to look through my application papers; I’m sending them to you with this. Sorry for the low quality of some of them – my scanner’s on the fritz ever since someone (Dom) decided to bathe it in vodka, so I can’t email them, and the copy shop round the corner is utter crap.

I only included one of the cover letters because they are all the same – ‘I’d be so grateful for the opportunity to work at your totally unique school which seems to be the best there is in the history of the world’ and so on. I’ll apply to pretty much every vacancy in a twenty mile radius from here (I really want to keep this flat) and see what happens.

Any feedback from you is appreciated; thanks a lot for doing this!

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. In case you still haven’t buried the hatchet with Mr West (which I strongly suggest you should; he teaches physics, he knows how to build bombs): I got you the biography on Nobel you wanted from the store. Hope that’ll tip the scales in your favour.

P.P.S. Since you asked: Dom for some reason decided that he wants to do his first year as a NQT in London. I think that’s rather idiotic, but then, it’s Dom, so what else is new. Anyway, if all goes according to plan, Billie will move into Dom’s room (and by extension possibly her odd copper boyfriend Lawrence...), at least for the time being. Once we had it fumigated.

***

King Mohammad IV of Morocco’s enthronement Day, 2002

Dear Sean,

thanks for your card from Yorkshire and greetings from Morocco to where Billie, Lawrence, Luke, and I dragged Dom who thought that our budget would get us to Hawaii (no chance). Anyway, M. is great, the beach is fantastic, and Billie’s blond hair results in her never having to pay for anything which also does wonders for our funds. I can even afford this amazing XXL sized camel postcard!

The day before we flew out here, I heard from my new school again. My boss is a P.E. teacher whose love for sports metaphors is probably only rivalled by that tracky bum wearing mate of yours. So looking forward to starting there in September...

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. Ever heard of Ibn Khaldun? According to the blurb on my beach book he is the ‘father of the philosophy of history’...

***

Two days before Viggo’s birthday, 2002

Dear Sean,

attached to this you find the itching powder you requested me to buy for Viggo’s upcoming birthday.

Meanwhile in the world of us people who try to be responsible adults: Do you recall that I told
you about this girl who seemed rather off to me, in the Y11 I’m teaching since September? I know the reason for that now. I was chaperoning this morning when their art teacher (who is about 100 years old and has the charisma of a stuffed walrus) took them to an exhibition on Greek sculptures, and she came out to me. Jade; not the walrus.

A couple of other girls, Jade, and I got left behind a bit, and unsurprisingly, considering the theme of the whole exhibition, there were quite a few marble naked guys frolicking about. Jade dawdled in front of a pair of them, naked and one with the arm around the other’s shoulder, you know the type (Castor and Pollux by Antinoos by the way; see I did pay attention in art class. Also I can read signs), and she stayed there for such a long time that I went back to fetch her, which was when we had this rather weird conversation.

I said something like, pretty nifty artist, that Antinoos, to which she answered ‘I’m gay, too.’

I’m serious; I’m not shortening it down.

Now, these are things I DIDN’T say in response:
- Castor and Pollux aren’t gay. They’re brothers which would make this incest.
- I am bi, actually.
- Why the fuck are you telling me this, do I look like Denise Robertson to you?

I think that proves my newly acquired self-restraint. No, seriously now, she was pretty nonchalant about it, like she was still talking about the statues and not herself, but I’m pretty sure it was the first time she’d said it to someone. Me. Marvellous show of judgement on her part.

What I actually did was
a. arch my brows (because man, segues are your friend, Jade...),
b. give her a two minute impromptu 101 crash course on the socially stabilising functions of homosexuality in Ancient Greece and
c. feel like an absolute tool while doing so.

On the plus side, when I was done, she didn’t look troubled or sexually confused (however that actually identifies itself visually) but was torn between plain old regular confusion and pity.

I stopped myself before I started on Wittgenstein, Foucault, and Barthes. (Btw, I NEED to get you to read Barthes’s ‘The Death of the Author’. He argues that an author’s intentions are absolutely irrelevant when interpreting a text. READ IT. I want to talk to you about it!!).

Back to Jade in the museum and my tremendous show of professional aptitude: Instead of droning on about gay philosophers she’d never heard of, I said something not at all lame like ‘Anyway, good for you’, to which she replied ‘yeah, really? All right’.

The morale of this story: I should’ve become a grievance councillor. Not.

Speaking of people who shouldn’t be left in charge of a child’s welfare: I am not required to visit my parents over Christmas this year since they are on safari or something (small blessings). I think Luke and I will be busy preventing Dom from setting fire to himself on New Years’, but other than that I’m free. If you want, I can help you respray your bike. I am also willing to act as your ruthless henchman if you want to take revenge on Viggo and Mr Bana; no one messes with a man’s motorbike.

Cheers,
Orlando

***
Dear Sean,

thanks for your letter. I still very much doubt that anyone who has to listen to me talking about Greek pederasty in the middle of an identity crisis actually feels reassured, but it’s kind of you to lie about it for my sake.

Second of all, thank you for the attachments to your letter. Billie came home to me sitting on the kitchen floor where I had collapsed due to a laughing fit, and she followed soon after. I’m not entirely sure whether you really were still within Jackson College’s curriculum with this, but we sure as hell appreciate the collective effort of your fourth years. Mind, it’s not necessarily all that encouraging that most of your kids write that they’d rather be dustmen or guinea pigs for experimental drugs than ever become a teacher. And I suppose the few that would consider this profession are in for a shock when they find out that they aren’t allowed to actually beat sense into their pupils.

While we were reading, Luke came round to take me out to dinner (we all resigned ourselves to the fact that Billie’s and my fridge will remain empty forevermore). He insists that I ask whether you paid those two girls (he and Billie presume the essays are from girls. The sparkly pink ink lends to that assumption) to write nice things about you. I am sure you’d never stoop so low as to bribe or threaten your pupils to sing a hymn of praise to you. You’re not all that good at disguising your handwriting.

To pay you back in kind, Billie and I had a couple of kids write what they’d have chosen as a job of they’d lived a couple of hundred years ago (I actually tried to incorporate that into my lessons on identity and whatnot; Billie just bribed her kids by telling them there’d be no homework). I’m sending you copies of our favourites – I do get why a lot of them think that piracy is a good choice, but I am a little worried about the ones picking crusader and prince of Troy.

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. Only just noticed your message on my answering machine, and it’s too late to call back. I’m out tomorrow evening (which will be... yesterday when you read this), but you can call me the day after (which will be... today, I think? – Highly inconvenient, this time and place difference).

***

Start-your-own-country-day, 2002

Dear Sean,

I’m returning all your books on Marxism and Leninism and an embarrassingly large amount of graphic novels I never gave back. I need to make shelf-space for a whole box of exciting things I bought that I won’t have time to read because my job is kicking my ass. Also, there are two books on Kierkegaard I am including – I am almost 100% certain that they aren’t mine, and since there is no library stamp in them, I don’t think I accidentally stole them either. Could you please ask Viggo whether they belong to him? Cheers.

And since the package is already way too big, and it will cost me a fortune to post it (it would be MUCH more convenient if you lived next door. Or owned a messenger pigeon with seriously sturdy wings), I am filling the box up with some of the postmodern stuff we talked about recently. Feel free to just ignore that, though, if you’re not in the mood.
I’ve been meaning to call all week but never found a quiet moment – Billie invited her Y12 over for dinner which traumatized them and me equally; Dom broke up with his latest I-am-gonna-marry-that-woman and expected me to dry his tears; and Luke insisted that we went out on dates, arguing that what we do couldn’t be called ‘dating’ otherwise. Also I have hours and hours of extra classes since I constantly have to fill in. Half the staff decided that they have the sniffles.

Hope you’re well and you’ve finally house-trained your bunch of new First Years.

Cheers,
Orlando

***

Early December 2002

Dear Sean,

thanks for your letter. I am still not sure I wanted to know that many details about Gordon Maxwell’s lovelife and the happenings in the upper hall broom closet (on the other hand: It brought back fond memories). Keep me posted on Mr Deep’s annual Christmas production, though, and if possible, tape it. I’ve been talking about drama classes at Jackson College to Luke and Billie, and neither of them believed a word of what I said about Mr Depp.

Anyway, I am sending you your Christmas gift early, so you have some time to practice and can’t give me any lame excuses during the winter holidays.

In case you’re wondering: Yes, this is an illegal copy. Do you have any idea what NQTs earn? And as well-off as my parents might be, I can’t very well go to them and tell them I need money to buy a legal copy of Warcraft III for my former history teacher. So deal with it.

If you need help setting things up (which, knowing you, you will), give me a ring, though I won’t be in during the second week of December because I’m chaperoning (trip to Cornwall – so exciting.). Still, if it’s just the basics, you can call anyway; Billie is in and could help you out (one of the many advantages of having her, not Dom, as a flatmate – she doesn’t think a CD-drive is a cupholder).

In case I forgot to say it on the phone yesterday: Thanks for the material on the Industrial Revolution in continental Europe you sent last week; it’s exactly what was missing from my lessons on Marx and Engels.

Anu belore dela’na (google it if you don’t know what it means, man),
Orlando

***

Day after my birthday (still slightly hung over), 2003

Dear Sean,

despite the winter holidays, I am SO BEHIND on work, it’s not even funny anymore. At this point, I am considering paying Billie to do my grading and hiring a lookalike to teach at least part of my classes (preferably that annoying Y8).

Before you say anything, it’s not because I am too much of a perfectionist and can’t leave well enough alone whilst planning lessons. Nor is it because of Warcraft. Well, not entirely. But really, it’s because I am incapable of putting a book down once I picked it up. Seriously, I am like an
alcoholic who reasons with himself ‘just one drop won’t hurt’ and then drinks the whole pub dry.

(This btw is also my excuse for not having found the spare parts for your bike yet, aside from the valves I am sending you now.)

Instead, I have been spending my days in the company of a wigged Frenchman, a Cromwell fanboy, and a sickly German – aka Voltaire, Locke, and Schiller.

Originally I’d set out to find material to prove to my class in Y11 that the separation of church and state is a fantastic idea (Bit of backstory for that: The R.E. teachers at my school are complete idiots – and not even in the tree-hugging, mentally deranged but somehow well meaning Viggo-way. Think a kind of narrow-mindedness that makes the pass of Thermopylae look like a six lane highway in comparison. – And things kind of escalated around the main holiday of their cult aka Christmas).

For some reason, I went for Voltaire’s Letters on the English first. Don’t know whether you remember, but in sixth form you gave bits to us on the English political system. I read some other of his letters again only two years ago, when I was writing an essay on Blaise Pascal’s dreary misanthropy that Voltaire addresses as well.

However, I nearly vomited into my cereal bowl when I read Voltaire’s letters on religion again – I had been sure that he was seriously critical, but as it turned out, he just hates a bit on Catholicism and the ‘wretched’ Protestants (who wouldn’t). He also does voice scepticism re: all organised religion, but he actually quite fancies a lot if the Church of England and as well as Quaker bullshit. In any case, I couldn’t use his letters for the point I was trying to make – not just because of the above mentioned, but also because the two translations I have are completely unsuitable for my Y11.

Let’s fast-forward through my following encounter with Locke’s Letter Concerning Tolerance, because he may start off promisingly – ‘For whatsoever people boast of the orthodoxy of their faith, for everyone is orthodox for himself, this is much rather mark of men striving for power and empire over one another than of the Church of Christ’, and he argues that intolerance is the source of civil unrest. But he then proceeds to claim that ‘promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist’, thus branding atheists enemies of the state.

And I just, yeah. What a dick. (Yeah, yeah, I know, it’s the 17th century, and atheism there must’ve meant anarchy, since no one had actually thought of inventing democracy yet. I. DON’T. CARE.)

I’d just read that bit about atheism when Billie came home from school, and I yelled at her for half an hour while she tried to make pizza, undoubtedly causing her to regret her decision to room with me.

By this point you’re probably wondering the same thing. Not regarding cohabitation, of course. But I can just hear you shouting at me ‘GET TO THE FUCKING POINT ALREADY, ORLANDO!’ – Well, I warned you at the start of this letter that I got a bit lost in books, so it’s your own fault if you’re still reading. Shut up.

Anyway, I had to abort my search for backup from Voltaire and Locke, which figures. That’s what you get from putting your faith in two deists. To solve my problem of source material, I ended up dumbing down a couple of paragraphs from Sartre’s ‘Nausea’. It took me twenty minutes max. and provided my Y11 with enough ammunition to shoot their R.E. teacher in the face. Happy ending there.
However, while my lesson planning problem was solved (for Y11 at least, don’t ask about the rest), I got right back to reading. My copy of Locke’s Letter is printed as part of a collection of letters on philosophical topics over the centuries. I bought it a while back and never really gotten round to reading it which is partly because its £4 price is owed to a strong smell of pipe smoke. But I couldn’t put it down again.

I am including a copy of Schiller’s Letters On the Aesthetic Education of Man because of all the letters I found this one to be the most thought-provoking. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, Schiller basically argues that a society can only truly overcome despotism – without ending in the terror and subsequent reinstatement of some form of dictatorship (= predicting the rise of your boyfriend Napoleon with that. In 1794, Clairvoyant, that Schiller) after a couple of years – if its citizens have been raised as free thinking and critical individuals. In his opinion, the study of art and literature is particularly helpful there because art, by definition, is not utilitarian, is not created for a specific use or purpose, but free.

Now, I KNOW you’re shaking your head while you’re reading this because this is German idealism at its best. We both know that Schiller would’ve gotten beaten up on a daily basis, if he were to show his face in the yard of any inner-city school. Still, do me a favour and read the letters anyway; I dare you to not find them compelling after all.

If you want, I can lend you the whole book as well. Like I said, it’s all letters, and that in itself is quite interesting, considering how they aren’t as fleeting and spontaneous as a face-to-face talk, and while the writer has a specific readership in mind, he is alone with his thoughts and not rushed to put them into words. On the other hand, letters usually don’t undergo the same re-writing and editing process as, say, essays and books, maybe making them their up close, hot-headed little brother, prone to go off half-cocked. For them to constitute a whole sub-genre says a lot about philosophical ideas and concepts in itself, don’t you think?

Gotta close, I really need to finish grading, and after yesterday’s bash, the flat looks like Normandy after D-day. Billie’s boyfriend Lawrence might be a copper during the day, but give him a pint or two and he decides to become a hooligan, and I am sad to report that my mates are easy to lead astray... Luke decided to burn Dom’s sandals on the balcony. Dom – who says hi by the way – stayed the night and went from here straight to school – not such a clever idea if you ask me, considering how he smelled like a pub’s floor when he left (wearing a pair of MY Chucks, I might add)... He didn’t seem too bothered by the possibility of being let go, though; his school isn’t quite the dream posting he made it out to be, something I can relate to, tbh.

Really gotta go now. Talk to you soon.

Cheers,
Orlando

P.S. Figures that I pick up my pen to write to you and after three pages I FORGET the actual reason for wanting to write... – Thank you for your present. You’re perfectly right, no 26 year old man can EXIST without owning a pipe. Or was that 62 and you were just projecting? Ta anyway.

P.P.S. Talking about birthday gifts: I did tell you that I bought myself a Ducati last week, right? She is a 900 Monster, build in 1994. You don’t want to know what she cost me, and she still needs a fucking lot of work – at least I know how I’ll spend my Easter break.

***

Valentine’s Day, 2003

Dear Sean,
happy Fleurop marketing day! Am writing this during a staff meeting, hence the scrawl and the questionable writing paper. This is, I kid you not, the fifth mandatory meeting this year. I wouldn’t mind if we were actually discussing something RELEVANT, like, say, pupils. Instead it’s complaining about ‘the lavatory situation’ for the third time now. Bloody hell. I need to find a new school, I’m serious.

Anyway, once this verbal torture is over, I got a date with a girl whom I met when I bought new footie shoes and who claims she is a pirate (I broke up with Luke, in case you hadn’t figured as much already). So my life isn’t entirely boring. I hope you made it on time to your dinner date with hot blond mom and your kids’ Pansies-for-Mates project didn’t end up with them uprooting all of J.C.’s flowerbeds.

Cheers,
Orlando

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April Fool’s Day (still. That only now dawned on me) 2003

Dear Sean,

Three things:

Firstly – The second we hung up I thought of another explanation: Has it occurred to you that Viggo’s and Mr Bana’s silence on the matter might be proof that they send letters like that to each other regularly? I mean yeah, the postal system isn’t entirely reliable these days, but for them to lose BOTH letters at the same time is highly unlikely, and I definitely posted them. So, either we have a thieving postman on the loose who steals secret love letters, or neither Viggo nor Mr Bana found it particularly noteworthy to have gotten declarations of eternal whatnot from each other. Maybe next year we should try having one of them file for divorce via letter instead. That should get a reaction out of them.

Secondly – and I can’t believe I am that slow – the other thing we were talking about just now, was that an April Fool’s joke as well? Or did you mean it?

Thirdly – Here’s the book on philosophical letters over the centuries. Let’s hope the postman doesn’t nick it as well.

Cheers,
Orlando

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The first day in April when it isn’t raining like hell, 2003

Dear Sean,

I’m at my parents’ place, well, actually Keira and I are staying at my cousin’s (the one with the garage) for the weekend to work on my Ducati. Just had to share this tidbit with you: I told my mother that I bought a bike, yeah? I talked quite a bit about it when I last spoke to her on my birthday, since I’d just bought it then, and also it beats talking about anything else to her or my father. So, when I arrived here, she had a gift for me. Surprisingly thoughtful and all that, you would say, and I’d agree and possibly feel a bit thrown by such sudden interest in my life. The gift was, however, a bicycle bell. A bell for a BICYCLE. So glad to have it confirmed that my parents really pay attention when I am talking to them. I am now hoping for decorative tinsel for my
handlebars for Christmas.

Anyway, the bike is coming along nicely. We replaced the leaky slave cylinder and are waiting for the cam belts I had to order. If you need something for your BMW, you can phone my cousin’s house; I told him to expect your call since your stupid bike always needs parts, doesn’t it?

Cheers,
Orlando

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A week after your birthday, 2003

Dear Sean,

here are the copies of the snaps I took on J.C.’s open door day. You’ll notice that half of the batch is glossy-advert-material; all smiling parents, competent looking teachers, beautiful flowerbeds, and happy pupils. I had Keira take a look at them, and she said they are all right, and she should know since she’s studying photography. On the other hand, she sleeps with me, so maybe she isn’t the most impartial judge.

Would you do me the favour of passing them on to Head McKellen? He said he wanted them asap so he could see if he could use them for the re-print of the school brochure and the website (though how anyone would think it a good idea to make Mr Hill of all people chief editor of the website is still beyond me). No news about the other thing so far btw. Like I told you, he seemed to like my resume and asked me about Germany and Israel, and overall I don’t think he had the urge to hit me; so I suppose that’s a good sign? I’m not terribly good at interpreting small talk tbh.

Anyway, the second half of the photos is NOT for the school brochure, so don’t mix them up. Though I think that McKellen would notice before he put them into print. Mr Bana and Viggo rolling down the south hill and straight into the flowerbeds there might be a joyous sight for anyone but the gardener, but it doesn’t make them look too competent. Neither does the wreath Viggo made afterwards; Mr Bana tries to wear it with pride, granted, but he still looks like a giant idiot. Since the rest of the pictures reveal that Claire is a chainsmoker, Mr West’s frown scares potential first years, and Karl’s tracky bums definitely ride too low, I don’t think McKellen would be too keen on them either.

Happy belated birthday by the way, sorry this wasn’t on time – blame the tardy photo shop.

Cheers,
Orlando

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Wed, May 28, 2003 at 1:18 AM
From: Orlando Bloom lando1978@compuserve.com>
To: Sean Bean seanbean@jacksoncollege.co.uk>
Subject:

So, Head McKellen gave me a call a couple of hours ago, and he offered me a job. Full time, starting after the summer holidays, live-in. He said he needed an answer within the next two weeks. That was around nine tonight.

Now, the reason why I’m writing is this: I really want to take that job. I think you of all people know why, so I’m not gonna try and explain; I’d sound like the school’s official brochure. I think
I might be good at it, too. It’s what’s bothering me about my jobs so far, that you’re supposed to check all the interest you’ve taken in your pupils at the door at 4 p.m.

But there are two things that keep me from ringing McKellen right away.

You know how the saying goes, that a criminal always returns to the scene of the crime. I think that American television made that up, actually, but whatever, it ends with the person being arrested and rotting in prison. What I’m trying to say, it’s not necessarily prudent to return, is it? Mind, I possibly fucked that up already when I decided to become a teacher, and you could say that one school is as bad as the other in terms of not-being-able-to-let-go. Is my slight apprehension just misinterpreted excitement? Or is it, in fact, a sign of refusing to grow up that I really want to return to J.C.?

I think I can answer that one myself. It’s not like living at J.C. equals living in one’s parents’ basement for one’s entire life (not judging, by the way; again, it’s just American television’s code for ‘failed at life’); and in any case, I’d much rather live in J.C.’s bike shed than in MY parents’ basement amidst my father’s wine collection.

The other thing, however. You were the one to suggest that I should apply, yeah, but that was months ago, and anyway, it started as a bit of a joke, right? Maybe be that that just got a bit out of hand? So, before I make any decision or say anything to McKellen, I gotta ask: You’d really be okay with me coming back to teach? I’m serious, if you think that’d be awkward or whatever, if you have objections of any kind, I’m all right with that. I can find another job. There are a couple of boarding schools hiring, and none of them even know about my slight attitude problem, so that’d be a plus. You’d just need to tell me in two week’s time, all right?

Anyway, you can’t tell from the length of this email, but I’ve been fiddling with it for way too long. I’ll hit send now before I ctrl+alt+del.

***

May, 29th, 2003

Dear Sean,

you do realize that it’s impossible for me to reply to your email adequately, right? Because I am – and this is a verbatim quote from Luke (if there’s one thing you get from exes, then it’s free character assessments) – emotionally retarded and incapable of saying something affectionate without being a dick about it.

This got obscure AND rather awkward in the first paragraph. Whatever, it beats the first attempt at replying to you. I was so embarrassed by that one that I actually burned the letter, three pages in, and accidentally set my waste bin on fire. Considering, this is going quite well.

I’m opting for briefness this time.

I am still a bit surprised as to HOW much I want the position at J.C., but I wouldn’t have accepted it without your okay. So, I’m glad you think the way you do. Also, about the other things you wrote about me, you, and us: Same here.

Talk to you soon.

Cheers,
Orlando

***
Dear Sean,

Viggo got it right, you know. If I’d only listened to him. I am of course not referring to his ridiculous belief that there is such a thing as a creator of the universe, but about his faith in technology and his insistence one should possess a mobile phone. I’m having a déjà vu moment – did I write this before?

Anyway. In the compartment of the train I am currently stuck in – no one, including the conductor and the bodiless voice over the speakers, knows WHY we’re stuck, but we have been for half an hour – there is only one mobile phone, and it is in the hands of a fucking annoying banker, sitting two rows down from me. He uses it to yell at his secretary as if it was her fault that the train is late. With his attitude, it even might be, she might’ve thrown herself in front of it.

If I were to adopt Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s attitude that property is theft, I’d just relieve him off the phone and use it to call you. However, that might end with me getting arrested, and I am fairly certain that Head McKellen adopts an unfavourable view upon his teaching staff having a criminal record.

Now, I have to actually write to you about what happened in school today, imagine that.

So, I got into a bit of a fight, and it’s your fault. I came into the staff room when one of our R.E. teachers was pontificating about a benevolent creator and the great big plan of the universe (or something, I wasn’t paying close attention at that point). Much like one tries to ignore the stink in a public bog, I tried to ignore him. But when he was finished, he turned towards me and asked ‘Wouldn’t you agree, Mr Bloom?’ like he was a clergyman handing out a wafer.

Well, no, obviously. So, I quoted a bit of Ayn Rand at him which led him to ask me ‘who has hurt you so much that you must lash out so violently?’ (only with a lot more words. I am editing this for storytelling purposes).

That is, of course a perfectly valid question – even if it doesn’t have any-fucking-thing to do with the original subject and is a fairly lame diversionary tactic.

The go-to-answer for someone from my generation is either Margaret Thatcher or Kurt Cobain, I suppose, and I said so. Not sure he got the joke. So I asked him if he meant ‘who is responsible for my upbringing and fucked it up so badly’ in which case the answer would probably be my former house teacher, aka you.

From the expression on his face I gathered that he now thinks you are the anti-Christ. So, if you should ever happen to be in the neighbourhood, look out for religious fanatics. They might want to ram a stake into your heart (or force feed you hemlock, come to think of it).

So, as you might’ve deduced already, I finished ‘Atlas Shrugged’, the Ayn Rand book you sent me. Actually, I finished it two days after I got it – how could I not what with your glowing recommendation. But I wanted to re-read some of her non-literary work before talking to you. I don’t want to go into detail here, but my, she is entertainingly controversial. Just like you predicted, I quite approve of her characterisation of Christianity as the most naked evocation of selfishness – always trying to get people to sacrifice themselves for ‘the greater good’ aka THEIR idea of what is good. On the other hand, her vigorous support of capitalism doesn’t strike me as quite fitting for your Marxist heart, and I’m not sure I buy what you wrote regarding that. – Better to discuss this face-to-face, though; think of this paragraph as a sticky note, reminding us to yell at each other some. Ah, aren’t you looking forward to being called WRONG to your face by me on
a daily basis from September on?

Speaking of September (or August, rather): My Ducati is almost ready to go, and I’ll definitely be
done with her when the summer holidays start. So hell yeah, I’ll come on a trip; I’m busy the first
two weeks, otherwise I’m free.

Gotta go. Talk soon.

O.

***

I’m too ill to know the date. Some time in July (August?) 2003.

Dear Sean,

I hate the Caribbean. I hate the sea. I hate boats. I hate food. I hate my sadistic girl-friend and her
horrible ideas, no matter that she looks fantastic in her idiotic pirate outfit. Did I mention that I hate
the sea?

If you excuse me now, I need to go and vomit some more. See you soon. Possibly. If I haven’t
died of seasickness first or landed in prison for killing Keira.

Orlando

P.S. I personalised the card for you, I hope you appreciate that. The stick figure hanging over the
bow and spewing his guts out is me.

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Assumption day, 2003

Dear Sean,

while you are filling up your ridiculously thirsty BMW, I bought Toblerone and this card. Karl
told me to get the one with the scantily dressed Swiss model, but this one, with the Alps, was 10
rp. cheaper. That’s not enough to buy proper roadmaps, I realize that, but it’s far too late for that
anyhow. This so isn’t the Stelvio pass. We’re not even in the right country, mate. Good thing
neither of us teaches Geography.

Ciao,

Orlando

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First day at school, 2003

Dear Orlando,

here, have a card, flowers a cactus, and a complimentary chair as housewarming gifts. I nicked
the chair from the staff room; it was previously Viggo’s, so you might want to perform an
exorcism on it before you use it. Feel free to carry it back and sit next to me from now on. In
exchange, I got Vig a toddler’s high chair which I chained to Eric’s. Might have to brace
ourselves for retaliation.

It’s good to have you back. Have a good start tomorrow.
Sean
Dear Eric,

this is not an essay on the beauty of Pi. I’m not sure whether this comes as a disappointment to you or whether this information is the only reason why you’re still reading but either way it is not. You receive a letter on torn out squared paper because this is the sole writing material I got handy. You can thank Simon Cooper for that and his attempt to do his physics homework during my lessons.

This place is a little less entertaining without you, I can say so much even though I might be biased and other people don’t even notice that you’re gone. Orlando for example told me over breakfast that Gavin Peterson keeps being late for his classes and claims that he waited in front of your room until he remembered that you weren’t there and math was changed for philosophy in his lesson plan. Orlando thinks that not even Peterson is that dense but used his spare fifteen minutes to make out with Sally Frampton in the upper girls’ lavatory, but there you go; you’re not even gone for a week and you’re already being used as a flimsy excuse.

I keep wanting to inquire after your wellbeing despite the lack of reason in it. Is it actually inconsiderate to write to you about how our days resemble balmy summer nights when you’re in the middle of a thunderstorm? Is dangling kingdom of heaven in front of your face – if having to deal with Percy Studwell’s “Martin Luther was totally a communist, Mr. M” and losing 20 quid to Cate during poker night can rightfully be called thus – considered calming or insensible?

Christopher rescheduled your classes and Elijah, Mir and Dom got them covered. He even told me to tell you to take as much time as you need, a sentiment that Ian as well as the rest of us second. You will be painfully missed, however, during the volleyball match next weekend. Karl’s ever so cheerful prognosis is that without your threatening presence the sixth formers will annihilate the staff team.

I started reading a Beuys biography last night and it is most illuminating. I’ll let you borrow it as soon as you’re back, even though I’m pretty sure that you’ll throw it out of your window after page ten (I wish you’d stop doing that. I shed silent tears for the poor rose bushes your books keep landing in…). The words ‘postmodern self-exploration’ and ‘socio-economic criticism’ star in leading roles in it and I can just hear you cussing all the way from Australia right now.

I’d end this by saying that you are in my prayers if it weren’t for my current lack of faith in those.

Viggo

********

Dear asshole,

thank you for your letter. And thank you specifically for telling me to stop being “a whiny ass pussy” for fretting that I might be hurting your feelings. I immensely appreciate your sensitive approach and can now stop crying myself to sleep while thinking I am a horrible friend.

It is good to hear you’re doing alright and haven’t lost your sense of humour. It always amazed me how human beings bridged the gap between personal loss and the world’s persistent need for them to go on and make decisions right after. But of all the constructions to me humour is the sturdiest overpass one can build.

Funnily enough – and this either tells you that I have no grown up friends or that I have been
absolutely corrupted by our job – the time this was clearest to me was when I showed ‘Life of Brian’ to my year 10. In the discussion afterwards I had Peter Baker nearly punching me in the face because he thought the movie tasteless and a disgrace and I think he even called me the Antichrist for subjecting them to it. I found that extraordinarily peculiar because I think that this kind of irony is clearly the best proof of how much they cared about the subject. But irony – and humour probably even more so – is not necessarily a built in programme in a 17 year old’s mind, is it.

So, this entire previous paragraph basically tells you that I am pleasantly surprised that you’re able to act older than a puberty whipped kid. Good on you, mate.

Speaking of puberty and whipping – I’m not sure what your latest info is (I suppose you talk to Orlando on the phone but somehow, holding the earpiece short-circuits his brain and turns his sentence structure into something even Kant would have had problems with deciphering).

Anyway, since we still haven’t been able to get a replacement for Ian Holm and we’re generally short because of your absence, Christopher has taken over most of the art classes in the upper forms. Reactions are pretty mixed so far, last I heard was that Michael Li got detention because he fell asleep and started snoring in the middle of class.

I daily count my blessings and now I can add to the list that I’m free to deal with art in my private time. And that I don’t snore.

By the way, did you know that Sean claims that he snores so loud that he sometimes accidentally wakes himself up with it? I’m not sure whether I believe that – it’s kind of a sorry excuse for his sleepiness some days and I have the growing suspicion that he and Karl engage in nightly World of Warcraft with some of the kids of year 10.

This is as far as rumours go at the moment, I’m afraid. I really did my best – following your wish and lurked about in dark corners and got the infamous chatterboxes drunk. But even a night out “wine testing” with Bernard only resulted in me having a headache for assembly the next morning and a very vivid memory of Bernie nearly talking himself into an orgasm about Milton. Again. All is quiet on the Western front you could say.

I have to go now because Bill promised to take this letter to the post and he’s about to drive to town. In fact, he is as of right now, sitting on my couch opposite of me and eats all the cookies I got from Sally Frampton for listening to her tale of woe and Gavin P.. They are too tasty to be inhaled by the handheld vac that is Billy Boyd.

Let me know how you’re doing and whether you want me to get that recipe for you.

Viggo

********

Hello Eric,

thank you for the biscuits! You obviously didn’t bake them yourself because they are actually edible (so, please do relay my gratitude to your sister or to whoever you stole them from). They taste especially good when dipped into my coffee, so excuse the crumbs and stains.

Apparently it makes no difference whether one is a teacher or a pupil – if one receives a package during lunch hour everyone else sitting at the table feels entitled to either at least ask what it entails or demand their share of the unknown contents. I told Dom and Orlando that you sent me porn involving kangaroos by the way. Dom has re-christened you to “that Aussie sicko”, just fyi.

It has actually been a couple of busy weeks for us. You asked how your pupils where doing - Dom, Elijah and Miranda are quite satisfied with their progress even though Mir said that some weren’t even able to add up 2 plus 2 without their calculator. I explained to her that you think that as soon as modern medicine is developed far enough everyone will have one implanted on the back of their hands. We agreed that there are worse cults than worshipping the calculator of Bana.

When will you be able to get back? Maybe it’s just because you wrote your last letter in a rush (despite the cookies) but I got the impression that things were far from sorted? Sad times, if school’s a thing to look forward to – you really shouldn’t be dreaming of hordes of spotty faced 14 year olds that you can torture with Algebra.
But seriously now. From what you wrote, you and Sandra clearly have unfinished business. But to unload all this on you, despite your current situation and without any regards to how you feel? What a bitch. I’m not sure whether her being so obviously selfish makes it easier or harder for you to deal with her right now. I mean when faced with someone from one’s past you realize a lot of things that you may have pushed away over the years and that this is probably the case with her as well. And I suppose sometimes it’s nothing that can be consciously decided – emotional outbursts don’t go that well with ratio, do they. But still, you didn’t deserve any of that. It’s a cliché thing to say – worse, to write – because if there’s one thing I know you because you already know that anyway. Just try to not chop her head of the next time you see her, it’d be very inconvenient to have to visit you in prison all the way back in Australia.

My, I would have made a horrible priest, wouldn’t I? Just try to picture me trying to give guidance to my flock and ending up telling them that committing murder is okay as long as you do it in England…

Speaking of, the church probably wouldn’t approve all that much but I’m making a detour on the way to paradise or whatever awaits our kids after graduation. Georgiana Watkins and Crispin Tad are very enthusiastic about Norse Gods and while I have the suspicion that this is mostly because they like thunderbolts and sturdy hammers (they should maybe consider a career as a blacksmiths) I find myself in the middle of a series of discussions about Norse mythology. It is quite fascinating and you’re gonna love it. I mentioned the Valkyrie to Johnny the other day and I think he is planning on forcing his drama classes to do a musical about Siegfried and his lot. Epic bloodshed is never as entertaining as when combined with yodeling and tap-dancing.

In other news, you really missed out on parent teacher evening – Sean got stalked all night by the mother of Dorothy Richards (the busty blonde whose knowledge of the Napoleonic Wars is summed up with “I thought Wellingtons were gum boots?” I think Sean cried that day). Anyway, parent-teacher-night. Sean developed a nervous twitch over the course of the evening and said that he hated his job, women and especially “annoying peroxide tarts”. If you’re interested in betting anyhow (say, that he’ll end up winning and dining her within the next month), just tell me how much I should put in the pot for you – I have a tenner on him bedding her come December. Cate is the bookie as per usual.

Oh, and you really should get yourself that Beuys biography – I have neglected it for a while in favour of Odin and friends but I have nearly finished it now. It continues to amaze me how close genius and retardation are to one another – and how (to change the subject yet again) apparently in art history classes kids never really understand this. But you already know how I feel about Christopher’s theoretical classes. – You’d enjoy our current evening conversations that are as intense as they are hushed. Who knew that half the staff secretly believed themselves to be reincarnations of Van Gogh and Michelangelo? You’re missed if only for your input of how a chainsaw should be every sculptor’s right hand, and literally at that.

Well, you’re missed aside from that, too. Take care of yourself, my friend.

Viggo

********

Dear mighty High Inquisitor,

as if I would tell you about my recent sexual exploits in a letter! Where some innocent soul could read it and get me thrown out of church. Also, each and every church would excommunicate you if they heard what you suggested I should do with their Gods in case I can’t find a willing woman. Or man. Or kangaroo. Thank you for considering me a likely fancier of bestiality, you’re a true mate. I have no idea how you can misconstrue inviting you to bet on Sean’s sex life like that.

No, but now seriously, we’re definitely sticking to indiscreet revelations regarding Bean (sadly, there still are none though). Because telling you here about activities, conducted naked and involving myself, would mean that I would have to ask you in return. And call me a coward but I am too afraid what I might hear about possible angry nostalgia sex between you and Sandra.
What’s really happening here involves extraordinarily little sex. I suppose it wouldn’t be too far-fetched to say that the average year 11 kid is more sexually active than the teachers in our school (aside from Dom maybe who claimed just yesterday that he needed a new bed frame for there was no more space for new notches on his old one – I hope he is kidding. The bed frame is school property after all).

Still I wouldn’t trade with anyone in year 11 which right now is mostly due to the ongoing art situation. Christopher is still teaching art history exclusively and the kids are increasingly frustrated. I admire his knowledge and his passion but trying to teach art without ever encouraging your students to try, to make them feel it for themselves? It simply cannot work. It’s like teaching how to swim by showing slides from the ocean, trying to teach football without pumping up the ball.

The last simile of course isn’t mine but Sean’s and (the most surprising thing!) this actually got him to get Karl to understand what we are all currently raving about during footie night et al. Can you picture poor Karl in midst a discussion about not only teaching but also art? But if even the man who thinks that his whistle is all the pedagogic he needs nods contemplatively, then something’s rotten in the state of Yorkshire. Myself, I am this close to doing field trips with my year 8 and make them draw fairies in the woods – which I suppose could count as some sort of religious experience, don’t you think.

So, frustration is the word of the week.

Closely related: gotta go; poker night!

Viggo

********

Dear Eric,

so, two more months? That’s a long time, though it will probably feel short – too short maybe – due to the avalanche of responsibilities crashing down on you. How you find time to write letters is absolutely beyond me – even if it is like you say and you can sort your thoughts when doing so.

I don’t think you’d mentioned before how big exactly your family’s business was. Or I forgot. I probably forgot. Anyway, from your stories I always imagined something like the little restaurant in the village, a bit above pub average but still cozy and well, smallish. However, your family’s chain apparently is as similar to the “White Horse” as Shakespeare is to Mitchell Barmish (who keeps writing these strange poems and asks Liv to read them by the way).

Naively, I had imagined that there surely had to be a chain of command that puts someone in charge even after an unexpected death. What you described sounded more like a bunch of headless chicken than an actual working system. How can ANYONE forget to order booze?! Unsurprisingly, when I first read your letter your description of the involuntary prohibition had me laughing loud enough that Harry came inquiring after me. He wants me to tell you ‘Quae nocent, saepe docent’ – I wish he’d stop randomly talking Latin outside his classroom.

Amoto quaeramus seria ludo, this right now is probably still only a small consolation for all the chaos you are expected to sort. But all of this is really a sign of how essential your mother has been for the business, isn’t it? Two months seem awfully short but I can’t say that I’d wish you to stay longer. This is only partly completely selfish; from what I understand your reasons for leaving are still valid enough. However, it’s good to hear that you and Sandra are neither having angry break up sex nor throwing kitchen knives at one another. Sounds like solid progress at least on that front.

- Excuse the mess on the paper by the way. This spot doesn’t only look like bird shit, it actually is. I am not sure what I did to deserve being target practice for sparrows but bird logic is very different to people logic, so I won’t question the justification of this act of war. It is a small price to pay for the peaceful beauty that is surrounding me as I write.

It still sometimes amazes me that on school grounds you can find a spot as quiet as this one – the one where we usually grill and hang our feet into the lake. It’s a bit too cold for that now and there
is not a soul in sight (apart from the angry sparrow and a few lazy flies) even though it is lunch break. But as per usual faced with the choice between peaceful solitude and the civil war in the dining rooms, the teenage stomach wins over the soul – and it is burger day.

Afternoon period starts soon – just the most important news from the home front: Sean’s still not dating the peroxide tart which results in Karl smiling an awful lot since he is the only one betting on Sean’s abstinence. I keep wondering whether he has some sort of insider information he doesn’t share – surely this is as illegal as it is in the stock market.

Viggo

********

Hey Eric,
do you remember that during the last staff meeting before summer holidays we decided that the wall of the outer gym hall needed re-decorating? Unsurprisingly nothing has happened over the summer holidays nor during the weeks after – and I heard someone out of year 11 saying that Christopher had merely frowned deeply at the suggestion of his art classes to do something about the ugly grey wall.

So, this morning? Bill called me because he was on watchdog duty before first period started and I couldn’t believe my eyes. The entire wall is covered in graffiti – the school’s crest held by two naked women and quotes from enlightenment authors all around it.

The kids loved it, it was close to impossible to get them back into the building. Christopher is fuming (as is the janitor – I wonder why it is that Marsters always behaves like it’s him who owns the building?). So far, Ian hasn’t been available for a comment. Over breakfast however, a certain philosophy teacher that could be mistaken for your younger brother was acting even smugger than usual, ditto for a handful of sixth formers later on.

Even though I don’t fully get the appeal of spray cans: Kudos. The guerilla war is definitely on now and I wouldn’t be surprised if Christopher retaliates by making art history tests obligatory for staff members as well. You’ll come back to find a police state firmly installed…

By the way, did I tell you that I had to ask Bernard to accompany me on my school trip since you’re not around? If you never hear from me again it’s most probably because Bernard got us into a pub brawl and we got headbutted to the point of complete amnesia by dedicated Arsenal fans. It has been good knowing you.

This would now be the moment for me to tentatively inquire after your health and cautiously ask whether you’re doing okay. But knowing you, you’re just too LAZY to write to your most loyal friend and comrade. Suit yourself, you selfish ungrateful prick.

Viggo

********

Hello Eric,

Bernie wants me to tell you that you’re missing out on the time of your life by which he means his entertaining company. – In other words: Greetings from London. We’re currently doing the boat trip (so excuse the scrawl) and so far no one has died, which makes me believe we’re having a whole regiment of guardian angels following us around. More about that asap (strip clubs? Work of the devil!). The weather’s fine, not too much rain, and the little bootlickers kids say in unison that they’d like you to be here. We’re sharing that sentiment but the show must go on – in this case ‘show’ equals the Houses of Parliament. Hope you’re well. – V.

********

Dear Eric,

I’m not hearing from you and I take it that this is because you’re green with jealousy over my fantastic trip to London.

Dear Lord, I know that it is different when you’re a pupil and experience this for the first time but
I have been doing this for 20 odd years and needing to bail pupils out for public indecency etc. gets very, very old. Obviously this excludes past staff trips that involved by far too much booze, women’s clothes, that pub near the railway station and creative ways to get yet more booze (and no, once again, I was not pimping you out. Suggesting to those women to measure your penis and having them pay for my drinks was NOT related. And don’t start with that ‘But I was nearly unconscious’ thing again.). Anyway, I am not even saying that our pupils should behave themselves and be good boring catholic choirboys and girls (even though I think my otherworldly employer would appreciate that). But is it asked too much of them to be at least a little creative about their fuck ups? This year’s dramatic highlights culminated all on one evening. Thursday night Bernard and I had to pick up Percy Studwell and Malcolm Perkins in a strip club because they didn’t have enough money for the champagne they ordered. Then I had the honour of driving Tracey Wingham to an emergency doctor for the morning-after pill (I’d have suggested brain surgery considering that she had sex with Gavin Peterson). Oh and then to top it all off I had to pick up BERNARD from the aforementioned strip club where he and Harry apparently are regulars. But strictly for the articles. All points for creativity would go out for Bernie there but the jury (= me) had to revoke them for his attempt to tongue-fuck me in the cab and calling me ‘Angel’.

Apart from that slightly weird Thursday however, we had a very pleasant trip. So much that I took some time to sit in a café close to Trafalgar Square (while the kids went on a shopping spree) to become all absorbed in thought about it. We keep trading the ‘stupidest pupils’ moments in the staff room and by God, grading and dealing with parents and yet more grading can be exhausting at times.

But when I watched them gathering around Nelson’s Column - Trevor Jones dedicatedly tending to John Marcus’s Mohawk, Sally Frampton flailing while she told her girl friends that the security guard at “Harrods” flirted with her, Joshua Darwin and Georgiana Watkins passionately arguing about music – well, I think I got a bit nostalgic. Moments like these you don’t really see the insecurities and the fears dominating their present, the road blocks and disappointments waiting for them, you just see the future wide open, everything possible.

Well, since you weren’t there to ‘accidentally’ shove me into a conveniently nearby fountain (I still don’t believe that was an accident), I must’ve looked kind of out of it. Until Peter Baker stepped up to me and asked whether it was my afternoon prayers I was so intensely immersed in. Are you laughing? This is not funny.

Okay, maybe it is a little funny.

In conclusion: The City is not the same without you. When you’re back, let’s go for a weekend. A concert in St. Paul’s, get pissed with some pretty Londoners and ride the tube naked or something equally mature; I mean it.

I hope you’re doing okay.

Viggo

********

From: Viggo Mortensen
To: Eric Bana
Subject:

I’m sorry I missed your call. I tried to reach you on your mobile several times since then but I, too, only ever get your answering service. Fucking phones are just as useless as this here is anyway. Because thing is, I don’t know what to write. There is nothing to say.

It is believed that religious people always know what, no, something to say that is supposed to console and comfort. Telling you to trust that your mom is in a better place now, with God. But what good does that? It’d only make your anger and your hurt and your wish to have her back sound selfish - as if you begrudged her this. But you’re not selfish. You’re not too late or redundant, so stop thinking that, you big idiot. Grief is not something you choose to feel or not
feel, there is no ‘appropriate’ time for it. It’s just there, it’s justified and logical, if that counts for anything. I’m so very sorry.
Winter break starts in eight days, I can fly down if you want me to. Call me.

********
Hey Eric,
I’m telling you that I should have just come down, that would have been cheaper. I just got my phone bill and I may not be that good at calculating as you are but I think that conversation we had about classification of breasts alone cost me half my December income. Not that this wasn’t well invested money but I think I’ll stick to letters until you return to England. Then you can tell me all about perfect B-cups while we’re lying on my carpet and NOT getting stoned on the pot I confiscated from John Marcus on Christmas Eve because that would be against school rules. I’ve thought about what you said about home – you remember that bit? I think we both fell asleep during some point of the conversation and I’m not ruling out that you talk in your sleep. No, wait, I know for a fact that you do that and you usually don’t make any sense. It’s not actually strange that you call two places home. In fact, I think you can collect quite a few of those locations over the course of your life and the number two only says that yours has been terribly dull so far. I for one have a metaphorical picket fence around the place I grew up in Argentina as well as my grandparents’ house in Denmark. Certainly our school. And probably a certain little fish’n’chip shop in York, the library at St. Lawrence as well as several other spots. From all of those places you take a piece with you and in exchange you leave something of you there, isn’t that so? That’s maybe why on a plane you usually have this hollow feeling in your stomach that won’t go away. But it also makes you feel at least a little incomplete and miserable when you’re there as well, doesn’t it? Sort of like you twist your skin when you’re checking whether you’ve fallen asleep; if it pinches it’s real. – Did you notice how I for once not brought up “The Matrix” and Agent Smith? Praise self-restraint!
Anyway, since one of your two homes is here? That little piece you left behind like a piglet’s fetus in a jar is starting to feel lonely. It’s about time that you get your ass back here.

Viggo
P.S. Christopher made his sixth formers learn the biographies of the ten most important 16th century Dutch painters by heart the week before the holidays alone, did I tell you that? I am planning a coup d’état to make myself head of the art department. I’d rule wisely and creatively and there’s a job opening for you planned in as well. A knight with a chainsaw, hah.

********
Dear Eric,
man, I am so happy for you that you finally found a suitable manager for the restaurants. After the hellish interviews it was about time! Congratulations to your and your sister’s perseverance, sounds like it’s finally starting to pay off. I was beginning to worry that you were gonna stay in Australia just because there was no other person willing to wear that silly looking chef’s hat. Were cutting it a bit close there, mate. I still bow to your manipulation management skills however. Regarding organized crime against Stalin Christopher, I am in awe of how you worked Orlando like a puppet on a string. I have been telling the other guys for weeks that we should step up our random acts of artistic rebellion. But my subtle suggestions usually ended with Sean or Harry throwing things at me (I may have used the word ‘creative terrorism’ on occasion). And all it took was one phone conversation between you and Orlando and Orlando then doing his ridiculous puppy boy act and everyone is on board.
Christopher frowns even more than usual and my interpretation of the brow of doom is that he
doesn’t approve. But since school has started again not a day passes without an art project of sorts.
The greatest thing is that we hardly have to do anything (always a good thing) because the older
kids, especially the usual suspects amongst the sixth formers, have ideas over ideas all on their
own. And who can resist teenage enthusiasm? No one, is the answer. Not even Karl who got
talked into modeling for Sean’s group that – what a surprise with Sean – does regal paintings. Karl
makes a disturbingly convincing Julius Caesar fyi.
Other than that, business as usual. My week started with Amanda Cunniningham slapping Gavin
Peterson in the face in the middle of my lecture on old testamentary revenge. Bill and I had
watchdog duty in the garden during first break and managed to score a tremendously high score
against the self-proclaimed football club of year 6. Orlando and I spent lunch break grading papers
in his room just to share bloomers – he won the stupidity contest because he had Malcolm Perkins
on his stack. Johnny got himself a set of false gold teeth over the weekend and he put them in for
lessons. Don’t ask me why, I thought his drama class is doing ‘Richard III’.
By the way, I asked Dom, Miranda and Elijah about your classes again and they said there’d be
no problem for you to pick up where they left off, they’re all within schedule. You’re not to
worry.
Gotta go, my art kids are waiting. We’re trying to chase the light in the darkness of the woods
tonight. Or, to quote Crispin Tad, “all kinds of shit looks arty-farty if you snap it in black and
white”. Truer words, my friend.

Viggo
P.S. If I had had my money on ‘January’ and not ‘December’, I’d have won the pot of the annual
Bean Sex Bet. Damn Sean and his too slow seduction of ‘the peroxide tart’… and damn Cate for
always being right.

*******
From: Viggo Mortensen
To: Eric Bana
Subject: piglet fetus reunion

Dear Eric,
just posted a letter to you (a proper one, not this electronic new age shit) but I forgot to say: Since
you so politely demanded to be collected from the airport at the end of the week, your time of
arrival and flight number would be helpful, idiot.
Love,
Viggo
That weekend in the city

Chapter Summary

Eric's and Viggo's boys' night out in London. (F/M/M PWP)

When it comes down to it, what is it that defines you? Is it the sum of your accomplishments and your failures, is it little bits of your every day life? Or is it maybe most clear who you are when you simply spend time with your best mate?

Eric never asks himself such questions. It’s Viggo who does and usually in order to lure him into doing things with sometimes questionable legality degree.

Scheduling things, booking a place to stay and choosing evening entertainment (legal as well as let’s say borderline-legal)? That’s Eric’s expertise. Viggo is the one for spontaneous epiphanies; Eric takes it from there. If this time for once that balance is slightly tweaked then neither of them addresses it.

Then she comes into the pub and sits down at the bar next to them. With Maria, it is a thing of slow, promising smiles and Eric understands those as effortlessly as he can read the glint in Viggo’s eyes. The whiskey is good, the music is pleasant and their conversation flows easily but is secondary.

The way her eyes flicker back and forth between Viggo and him that is even more telling than murmured words and lingering touches. Eric bites back a smile when moments – long ones, as they are all so full of promise – later Viggo looks at him and arches an eyebrow, knowing that he isn’t the first one to think it but willing to take the lead from there. When Vig suggests another drink in her flat, all three of them know how very much this is not what’s about to happen.

Eric could argue that he doesn’t need a babysitter to supervise his fucking. As things are, they’ve seen each other butt naked on too many occasions to keep track off anyhow and it’s just sex. In any case, this is a blokes’ weekend, so there.

He kisses her in the privacy of her hallway, surges of slow burning heat run through him. She quietly moans into his mouth as Viggo nuzzles her neck and presses her tighter against Eric. He responds – with her leg pushing between his how could he not? –, tastes the darkness of her red wine on her tongue and feels her chuckle curling around his own because Viggo calls him an eager schoolboy. He cuffs his friend’s shoulder lightly in retaliation and Vig’s answering growl makes her mould this little bit more between, against them.

He knows very well that none of this is planned but damn, this feels so very, very right; the perfect equation. Her low moans answer to something deep inside of him that he hadn’t even known had been calling out. This, here, now is mathematically highly implausible – and he can just hear Viggo’s mocking laughter if he’d had said that out loud. As if anything in life could be planned and calculated.

Somehow she manages to kiss them both, touch them both just right, and still direct them to her bedroom without them crushing into something. Well, apart from a few walls, decorated with framed movie posters from the 1950s. Viggo – in midst pulling his shirt over his head – compliments her on her navigation skills and “fuck, your hips as well”. For all the years Eric has
known him he still hasn’t quite figured out how something random like this can be thought charming, is charming.

She murmurs against Viggo’s lips, voice lingering between and ironic commentary and sincere compliment, “I like your mouth.” He replies in the same tone, “I like what you do to it.”

Eric kisses the back of her neck, tasting the salty clearness of fresh sweat. Blindly she reaches behind herself and her hand curls against his hip, reeling him in again – “get these of, for heaven’s sake”.

Just as Eric takes half a step back, Viggo’s fingers have undone her blouse and her dark blond hair falls softly over her now naked shoulders. Eric’s hands fall still on his belt buckle as all he can concentrate on is the sight of her long naked back, the curve of her hips and her ass underneath her skirt. For a moment there is no urgency to get undressed. All he wants is to drop to his knees, his hands on her hips while for hours and hours he kisses the soft flesh still hidden under the light fabric. Just to touch –

Viggo’s hand finds the zipper of her skirt and there is the sound of almost-tearing fabric and a muttered, “A little help here?” His friend’s eyes have clouded over and Eric has seen that before.

Easily the silky skirt drops after Eric has pulled down the zipper and they kiss – slowly and luxuriously while she unbuttons his shirt and he steps out of his pants. She has to stand on her tiptoes to reach his lips, her fingers find his cock and goddamn, how her hand can feel so small and so very perfect is beyond him. Her touch, her taste, her smell, her breasts against his chest and the way she exhales quiet moans – he wraps his arm around her slender waist and half lifts her up to fit against him even better.

And for a second he wants this to last, God yes, there is the fleeting thought of keeping her to himself. But something rises in his stomach at that, claws at his heart, and he breaks the kiss, sucks in air breathlessly just as she grips his cock a little tighter. His eyes flicker to Viggo who is – just like he thought, knew – watching them, and when Eric’s gaze returns to her, she’s smiling before she pushes him down onto the bed.

As he moves up the bed his eyes take their fill of her gorgeous casual nakedness, the way she straightens a little as she looks back at Viggo. Her invitation is delivered by eyebrows hopping up once and that gets him to move, to start undressing as well to catch up. Viggo’s motions are that bit frantic and Eric doesn’t even laugh (for once) because fuck, can he relate. He wants her so badly.

She crawls up the mattress, he parts his legs to make room for her. He cups her cheek with his left hand when she is within reach and his fingers quiver against the back of her head as she licks up his cock with one long swipe. A curse spills over his lips and her shushing sound is more than counter effective, wet mouth vibrating against him.

His eyes drift shut as she takes him in – there is nothing but that wet warmth surrounding him, her soft touches caressing his inner thighs, the small pleased sounds she makes that he can’t hear but feel. Her knowing hands push his thighs further apart and he should feel exposed, doesn’t however. It’s more a pleasant buzz of excitement that runs through him as she does what she wants and he lets her. Floating, egoistically long moments he focuses on just that; that suction, those vibrations, and it’s so good he never wants it to –

“Hey there,” she purrs flirtily against his flesh but directed at Viggo.

Vig is at the foot of the bed, knees already pushing her feet apart and his answer is as truthfully raw as he only gets in situations like these: “You’re so damn beautiful.”
When she looks up at Eric she smiles that determined, impatient smile that Eric knows is a mirror image of Viggo’s without even looking at his friend. “God, yes, you are,” he all but whispers, almost reverent at the irresistibility of those soft lips and his breathing stutters (he can’t do anything about it, how ridiculous is that). She takes him into her mouth again, her hands slide under him to cup his butt. Her nails dig into his muscles when Viggo is where he likes to be and has his hand against the back of her neck, pushing her further down.

She lets him, just like Eric’s happy with Viggo orchestrating their combined pleasure. She moans around him just as his cock slides past that tight muscle in the back of her throat, the tightness and the vibration almost making him lose his mind with want. So perfect, so damn fucking perfect. He bends his knees and thrusts up into her mouth, grunts apologetically when she chokes a little but urges him to continue. His hand slides over her soft curls, graces over Viggo’s fingers still curled in the back of her neck, before he fists her hair convulsively and bucks up again, cursing because she swallows around him. Fuck, just once more and he’ll –

Viggo’s low chuckle makes him look up, regain enough focus to keep himself from coming. He knows his answering “Not funny, Vig” sounds dangerous and low and still grateful; is surely received as such.

“Schoolboy,” Viggo just repeats and laughs again when Eric rolls his eyes, just bends his leg and kicks him in the ass.

“If you two are done with your pissing contest –,” she says, kissing his belly, up his chest, “– maybe one of you would –”

“Condoms?” Viggo takes the short cut, reading her right and getting to it.

“In the nightstand,” she replies and Eric reaches over to toss his friend a small square packet. Viggo catches it and thanks him with a toothy grin, just this side of feral. Eric’s about to comment on that – mockingly or with encouragement, he isn’t sure – when she tongues his nipple and shifts to straddle him, her hand on his balls once more and all of a sudden it’s difficult to focus again. He lets her kiss him, thrusts up into her hand while he cradles her close, only distantly he hears the ripping of foil and Viggo’s impatient breathing.

Then she breaks the kiss and her small hand cups his cheek, fingers caressing over his beard. In the semi darkness of the room he sees the light reflecting in her eyes. She smiles down at him again and once again he responds in kind, automatically and easily, and thinks that yeah, this works, as he feels her warm breath on his skin.

“Okay?” Viggo asks then. – “Yeah,” she says, an understatement if there’s ever been one judging from the low guttural way she talks now. “Good?” Eric enquires anyhow, pleasure curling the corner of his mouth as his hand runs down her back to the curve of her ass. “God –,” she answers, drawn out and moves, responding to Viggo’s slow thrusts.

The sound of naked flesh against naked flesh thickens the air, moans and growling groans weighing it down further. Eric has difficulties to breathe, would happily suffocate on lust, what her pleased sighs in response to Viggo’s concentrated precision do to him. He’s panting open mouthed, her kiss sloppy now, Eric has no idea how Viggo’s able to be focused enough to –

“Come here,” Viggo spreads his knees further, kneecaps pushing Eric’s thighs apart and Eric look over her shoulder at his friend. “Let’s give him a bit of a show.” Vig’s eyebrows hop up, promising a wicked treat even as she laughs and follows the tug of his hands, into his lap.

“Aren’t you the good Samaritan,” Eric replies with a grin, leaning back on his elbows. But really, of the two of them, Viggo doesn’t like playing it up – that’s Eric with his tendency to be a bit too
loud and too crude (like anything ‘modern art’). Viggo, he just appreciates beauty and brings it out in everything he creates and apparently more than that, too.

Each of his thrusts sends ripples of pleasure through her and she arches against him. Mesmerized Eric stares at her – she’s gorgeous not just because of her soft curves that Viggo’s hands trace and her skin shimmering with sweat but her self-confidence and the obvious and completely egoistical pleasure she takes from this. Her long neck is exposed as she twists to kiss Viggo and the curve of her breasts is absolutely irresistible.

When Eric rises to kneel in front of her she holds on to his shoulder, clings to him for support and nudges him down at the same time. He follows all too willingly, mouthing her breasts that Viggo’s motions push against his lips and tongue.

“You feel amazing,” he hears Viggo murmur and it takes her two, three thrusts and licks to respond.

“You’re driving me crazy,” she sighs, a crack to her voice, and her tight hold on Eric’s hair almost hurts as she pulls him even closer to herself. “God, I want –”

Eric raises his head and there’s a plea in her gaze, steeled by determined want. His gaze flickers to Viggo whose eyes are almost completely black and he arches a brow, as if the decision hasn’t long been made. His friend’s scarred lip curls into a smile, wicked and almost childishly joyful at the same time.

“Let’s lie down, do this properly now,” Eric decides.

The execution of good intentions starts off a bit sloppy. Eric gratefully pushes into her offered fist but it becomes all too evident that neither of the other two can focus long enough to coordinate this.

He’s the one arranges them, her in the middle and Viggo spooning up behind her, and Eric knows (and maybe sometimes he should question how he gained such intimate knowledge on such matters) that Vig’s dedication to prepping borders on obsession. Her strokes in consequence become pleasingly, distractingly irregular and she flashes him a thankful glance from under fluttering eyelids when he gently pushes her hand away to roll the condom on by himself.

“Vig?” Eric murmurs when he’s done, not a really a question, more a reminder that they actually are in the middle of something.

“Hm?” his friend replies distractedly and does something that makes her gasp and clutch Eric’s arm.

“C’mon,” Eric prompts and kisses her trembling lips slowly, asking her, “Alright?”

She smiles in response and against his lips – “Oh, you bet,” – and Eric thinks that he might give Viggo a slap to snap him out of it but just then her eyes widen and she draws in air with one harsh, long breath.

Viggo’s muttering curses, lacing with praise effortlessly, and Eric can see her skin under his hand turn white as he grips it too hard in order to go slow. She exhales and turns to him to be kissed, and it’s as gentle and tender as hardly anyone would believe Viggo capable of. It calms the fire that’s burning inside of Eric do that it isn’t scorching, at least not for the moment. He brushes stray curls of her hair off her shoulder and lets his fingertips dance over her heated skin, content to watch. But as if of one mind, her hand finds his ready cock just as Viggo blindly reaches out to nudge Eric’s shoulder.
“God, you two are pushy,” Eric complains and she has to break the kiss with Viggo because laughing in this awkward angle is near impossible. He runs his hand down her flat belly, fingers playing with coarse hair before they slide into hot wetness.


Viggo’s snickering against the back of her neck, shallow slow thrusts into her body never wavering. Eric locks eyes with her and then shakes his head in mock exasperation, then he lifts her leg to pull it over his side. Viggo slows down to a halt and again Eric knows him to be watching as both his own and her hand are on his cock to guide him into her.

“Oh, my God –” she groans as he’s not even half in yet.

“Always this blasphemy, tsktsk” Viggo rumbles and for a second Eric wants to punch him. Absentmindedly he wonders whether it’s bad manners to hit the man whose cock you can feel alongside yours, only separated by a thin layer of skin. Probably is.

“Shut up now,” he replies, belatedly and affectionately, and pushes into her with one fluid motion. She groans and Viggo moans quietly in agreement.

It’s mindblowing as it is imperfect. It takes them some time to find a rhythm and even that has its hitches – Eric likes it slower than Viggo, always has – but all those little glitches make it even better in his mind. It’s like that little pinch that assures you that you’re awake and not dreaming, and God, yes, otherwise this could be a dream – her greedy kisses rob him of his mind and she’s so tight and wet and her openly shown pleasure and Viggo’s annoying, endearing impatience keep Eric as high as a fucking kite.

The low chuckles over their uneven rhythm die down, make way for quiet appreciation and gasps for air as he’s drowning in sensation. In the end, Viggo gets his way, as he reaches over and grabs Eric’s elbow to pull them even closer together; foreplay over. Eric licks the trembling persistent moan from her lips, holds her while he stays deep inside her, swallows her quietly uttered “please, please, God, Viggo” until she’s shuddering between them; until she freezes for the first time. The expression of surprise in her wide eyes, her evident bliss, makes Eric lose his rhythm completely. She convulses between them, around them, and Eric just fucks her deeper now, waves of intense satisfaction rolling inside of him. She cusses and moans, clings to him as inside her he feels Viggo thrusting faster and harder as well, once twice, thrice before Vig groans against her neck and lets go, muttering sweet nothings into her ear as he comes. In response she bites Eric’s lower lip as he desperately fights on the edge of climax for a few seconds – he loses that battle as she becomes even tighter around him and pushes him over forcefully with one more quiet whimper – “Eric -.”

Afterwards, he turns onto his back, breathing heavily, and stares unseeingly at the semi-blackness of her ceiling. “That was –,” he starts and it doesn’t surprise him that he doesn’t have any words to describe this deep satisfaction. His fingers are jittery when he ties up the condom. “Fuck, that was –”

“Now look what you’ve done,” Viggo chides her mockingly in the darkness.

She turns fully towards him, her back still against Eric’s side, warm and smooth against him. “What?” Her voice is intimate, despite the amused challenge in her question.

Viggo’s low chuckle is as familiar as it’s comforting – “you broke him, you naughty woman.”

She says the stupidest things all the fucking time and Eric still doesn’t think him an idiot. He closes his eyes, real darkness now, nothing but their combined heat and low voices, quietly shared
kisses, the distant sound of London night traffic outside the window.

Man, he’s missed this. The pure physicality of sex. Feeling like he’s fully awake – finally (after almost sleepwalking through life, in comparison) – ‘cause he’s being touched, touches; hears, inhales, feels – not just the excitingly new territory that is the other person but finally feeling himself again

Her soft voice drifts to him through the darkness – “Night, Eric,” – and the pleasant buzz of almost-sleep. He feels her hand on his belly and shifts, spoons up behind her. His arm finds its place, draped over her side, and as his fingers touch warm flesh, there’s one a little too loud snort and twitching.

“Wuss,” Eric murmurs against the back of her neck as she presses herself against him, fitting perfectly. He’s out even before Viggo can (once again) unconvincingly deny his ticklishness.

He sleeps like the dead, dreamless, quiet, warm, and his consciousness only stirs and lazily stretches at the sound of a flushing toilet.

He exhales and rolls his shoulders, his own motion making him aware of the body curled up against him. Turning his head he buries his nose in soft hair that smells of flowery shampoo and the smoky bar, of her underneath. She doesn’t wake when he pulls her closer yet, wraps his left arm around her slender body as well and just ravels in this closeness, her knee between his legs and her head still on his chest.

Somewhere down the hall a door is opened, a light switch is pushed and grey becomes darker grey for Eric again. Quiet footsteps on the thick carpet of the bedroom, Eric hides a smile in her hair when there’s a dull thud as well and a grunt, a swallowed curse. The rustling of clothes is followed by the almost silent sound of Viggo’s mobile being switched on and for a moment Eric contemplates whether Vig is about to use his phone’s camera to make incriminating photos of him (again).

He finally opens his eyes and raises his head from the pillow, blinking away the darkness, but Viggo’s not photographing. Only dressed in his boxers he stands hunched over his mobile and its blueish light illuminates his private smile as he texts. Eric has to stretch a little, his right arm half under her sleeping body, to be able to look at his watch and before he’s managed that, Viggo murmurs, “Half past five, go back to sleep.”

Eric’s still too sleepy to come up with a witty response but defiantly he keeps his eyes open while Viggo finishes his text, stuffs his phone back into his jeans and climbs back into bed. Maria hums when he slides back under the covers and strokes over her hip down her thigh, but again she just keeps breathing quietly against Eric’s skin.

“Anything urgent?” he whispers, only half serious because Viggo is bloody addicted to his phone.

“Orlando wants to know whether he needs to come down to bail us out of prison,” Viggo replies with amusement. “Says he’d have to borrow money from Karl first, though.”

“As if that tight arse would give him any,” Eric chuckles quietly. “What did you reply?”

“No need,” Maria’s voice is cracking a little and she still doesn’t move, “I’m gonna need to chuck you out in an hour anyway.”

“Now that’s not nice,” Viggo rumbles and the mattress creaks a little as he pushes himself up to kiss her naked shoulder.

“Morning,” Eric murmurs and manages to pull her a little closer yet.
They spend the next hour with lazy morning making out and Eric never really fully wakes up – even though her wicked hands make him come amazingly hard again – until about seven. Then she returns from the bathroom fully dressed and with perfect make up. Viggo’s still sleeping soundly when Eric remarks that he feels rather underdressed in comparison and it makes her laugh.

Thanks to the early morning sex she’s already a little late for work. Still, she doesn’t ‘chuck’ them out before they got a goodbye kiss and were allowed to get dressed. Eric is rather thankful because outside it is fricking cold, especially in comparison to her warm bed. And her.

Viggo falls asleep on the tube. That leaves Eric having to watch out for their station and think deep thoughts about time tables while Viggo’s soft snores camouflage the sound of his rumbling belly. The elderly lady opposite of them still holds her bag from Paul’s tightly to her chest and eyes them warily.

During the short walk from their station to their hotel Viggo starts humming to himself, not a song but just the occasional grunt, sometimes affirmatively sometimes not so much. Not for the first time Eric reckons that it’s quite reassuring that he can hear his friend think. His thoughts are probably similar to Eric’s own; partly directed towards breakfast, partly still lingering at the memory of the night. There’s nothing as satisfying as making love to a beautiful woman. And having bacon and eggs afterwards.

“Do you ever miss it?” he asks and the air is actually cold enough for his words to form tiny puffs of white in the air.

“Yes, terribly,” Viggo replies and nods.

“Yeah,” Eric hums, mind drifting to a warmer place again, preferably between Maria’s legs.

“Eric?” Viggo lightens a cigarette, fingertips trembling a little from fatigue and chill.

“Hm?”

After inhaling the first drag, Vig inquires around it, “Do I miss what?”

“Women,” Eric replies matter of factly. What else could they be talking about at fuck early in the morning? After a moment he corrects himself thoughtfully, “No, I mean, being involved and all that.”

Viggo thinks about it the time it takes them to cross the street, then, “I can hardly remember.”

“Really.” Eric’s voice is as dry as smoke. Viggo has the memory of an elephant. Just ask anyone who owes him money or, worse, favours.

But Viggo just nods. “Mmhm. I’ve always found it difficult to imagine why I was with someone,” a frown and then a rewording, “why I loved them when I didn’t any longer.”

“That’s too deep for this early in the morning,” Eric says after a moment of mental dead-end streets. He squints a little against the grayish morning, constant twilight on this rainy day, and kicks an empty beer bottle out of his way. It clanks over the uneven pavement until it’s caught by a wiry shrubbery on the roadside.

“It’s true though,” Viggo remarks, “I mean how can you recall a feeling that is completely unexplainable, that makes no sense at all in the first place?”
It’s not like Viggo’s questions are new. He just usually voices them primarily to raise Harry’s and Sean’s hackles who never agree on anything aside from both being complete closet romantics. Just that right now there is no one to tease present. This is different and while Eric knows that there’s something wrong in that equation it is too early for him to be able to point out what. So he just grunts and shrugs, response pending.

“You’re a shitty conversationalist,” Viggo says after a few moments, but forgivingly really, before he purposefully steps into a puddle, the splash of water wetting both their trousers. Eric shoves him and the other man nearly stumbles in front of a bus that just drives past their hotel’s entrance.

“I just wanted to know,” Eric defends himself, “whether you miss getting laid regularly. But thanks for oversharing your soul stuff.”

“You’re welcome,” Viggo replies. He flips his cigarette to the ground and crushes its glow with his heel. “Do you miss it?”

“Getting laid?” Eric asks back, right before entering the revolving door. He waits for Viggo to follow and once they’re in the quiet and warm lobby he answers, “Hell, if I could have sex every time I wanted to I’d never get any work done.”

The lobby smells of carpet and warmth and Eric rubs his eyes, wishing he had his sunglasses as they walk up to the reception.

“Ian might fire you for shagging right in the middle of your math classes,” Viggo says and shakes his head somewhat mournfully at the confused looking receptionist. “127 and 128, please.”

Eric turns his first-period-business-smile towards the over-caffeinated looking girl who fishes for their keys. “Good morning! – Can they fire you for following your nature, Vig? I mean if that doesn’t involve pupils, obviously?”

“Hey, speak for yourself.” Viggo answers while smiling at the receptionist. “But I suppose my party even believes in no sex before marriage, mate.”

“Fucking church,” Eric concludes and lets Viggo cuff him half heartedly. Towards the girl he says, “Can we have breakfast? We’re about to die from starvation.”

The girl looks with what he presumes is interest – or possibly repugnance – back and forth between them but helpfully points them towards the elevator. He grabs Viggo’s arm and drags him along before he can protest and say some bullshit about sleep being more important than bacon and eggs. They watch how the elevator lights blink them slowly towards their destination.

In the restaurant Eric transfers about half of the buffet onto their table – he has experience in frightening away pupils to get to the stuff he wants, so the few scattered sleepy eyed businessmen aren’t really a challenge. He packs their table with toast and fruits, yoghurt and bacon, eggs and sausages, and whatever else he can grab, then he goes again just to fetch himself some extra butter and to collect Viggo from the battleground that apparently is the coffee corner.

Vig cradles his conquered mug protectively in both hands but lets Eric push him onto a seat and watches him eat. He blinks tiredly and man, Eric can relate. More sleep sounds like a concept almost as good as eating.

“You know what I miss?” Eric says thoughtfully and his lips feel buttery from his croissant. “Waking up with someone half on top of me. Sleeping with a woman, yeah?”

Viggo looks at him for a long moment like he sometimes does and he is probably able to stare pimples onto people’s faces with that look. “Hair in your face, drool on your chest, elbow in your
balls – sleeping?” he asks skeptically.

“You’ve been dating the wrong women, my friend. With apparently freakishly long arms, too.”

Eric feels a smile curling his lips as he tries to explain. “Isn’t it great, when you wake up and there is someone wrapped around you? Fitting perfectly against you, like… I dunno. Someone to pull close and feel their warmth and have them snuggling close to you without even waking?”

“Someone who complains when you fart in bed,” Viggo adds helpfully, bloody realist that he is underneath all that camouflage of faith and religion. “I will never ever understand women; in all honesty. But yeah, got it. You long for a hot water bottle substitute. You should write that down for your wedding vow.”

“As if I’d ever get married,” Eric snorts, shakes his head and looks undecidedly at the array of food on the table. “All my attempts would be ruined because my best man’d do one of the bridesmaids on the altar.”

In response, Viggo mumbles something but Eric doesn’t get it. He looks up from his bacon toast. Most of Vig’s face is hidden by his huge cup of coffee but through its wafting steam he watches Eric intently.

“Huh?” Eric arches a brow and shoves some of his toast into his mouth, yawns at the same time and rubs his eye with the ball of his thumb.

“You are doing alright though?” Viggo repeats, the steadiness of his gaze making this not an odd question at all.

The trips they do over some weekends never need a reason, or at least nothing more sophisticated than celebrating three free days in a row and no papers to grade. But Eric knows that this time – the first trip after Australia – it’s been maybe a little different.

“You fishing for compliments?” he enquires, arching a friendly eyebrow. Yes, he is.

“Do you have some spare?” Viggo asks and his eyes lose that intense staring quality. Eric could pile up an amount of flattering well, stuff about Vig; easily as high as the non-metaphorical food pyramid on their table. Not just right now but any day. But Viggo obviously doesn’t feel the need to listen to any of Eric’s manly love declarations and odes to friendship. He has already put his cup down and now pokes the cereal Eric fetched him with his usual morning suspicion.

Eric slowly chews his bread and melon and bacon. Thinks of the stupidly random activities they’ve indulged in over the last couple of days and how the dirty city air allowed him to breathe in freely for the first time in he can’t remember how long. Everyone, he decides, should have a best mate whose idea of moral support involves booze and hot blondes. Even if he is a hopeless skeptic when it comes to the issue of love.

Maybe it should make him fret that he only feels like himself again (finally) after shedding all that grown up responsibility and reason. After he has jumped into puddles and got extraordinarily drunk on cheap whiskey, strippers, oh yeah and that last night, too. Maybe it should. Would be a reasonable worry, wouldn’t it?

Well, bullshit.

(Later on the M1, Eric thinks of an appropriate response to Vig’s early morning statement about forgetting how love feels. He calls his friend a lazy arse and a cynic. Viggo looks at him contemplatively and he stares back – for however long he can without driving them into a ditch anyway. They then discuss class tests, what to get for Cate’s birthday and have the usual
neverending argument over cricket while they are stuck in traffic. Doesn’t matter; it’s not like any of these topics have a deadline.)

***
The easy lightheartedness of the truth

Chapter Summary

Eric and Viggo sit in lawn chairs and chat.

It’s a mild night, mild for these parts of the world anyhow. Eric is mostly constantly cold in England, one of the few things he resents about the country, while Viggo sways between finding it too hot and too cold.

Vig has his beer dangling from his fingers and his elbow is resting on his knee; sort of like he were posing for Rodin’s Thinker and it’s one of those nights that he doesn’t seem to feel the slightly creepy cold coming from the ground.

They have dragged the stupidly ugly but ultimately comfortable lawn chairs they got out onto one of the lawns on school ground. It means they can’t really booze nor smoke some of Viggo’s pot because of the kids that aren’t supposed to be out at this hour but of course are. It also means that Eric insisted on borrowing Viggo’s blanket because he gets cold during hours of sitting outside.

He wouldn’t want to miss it though. For one, of course he has at least brought a bottle of beer; it’s not like any wayward pupils will search under his blanket. Also, it’s a fucking beautiful night and there weren’t any sports on, stargazing is the next best alternative to that.

Eric doesn’t know that much about astronomy and the little he does know is arse backwards in this hemisphere. He still squints into the sky, under the blanket he cradles his beer in his lap and just reckons that life really is rather alright like this.

“So, I’ve been thinking,” Viggo announces eventually.

Eric doesn’t look at him, but slouches a little deeper in his seat. “Nope, my friend,” he corrects, “what you have been doing is called brooding.”

Viggo snorts and his chair creaks in protest when he leans back in it. “Whatever.”

“You’re a brooder, accept it,” Eric insists in what he calls his helpful voice.

“Shut up.”

Eric turns towards Viggo and he can so see the other man struggling while he’s trying to keep his Rodin like importance. Smirking, he twists the metaphorical knife a bit, “You just can’t stand it when I’m right, huh? When I win the semantics game? Brooder.”

“You…” Viggo starts and as he shakes his head some strands of his already again too long blond hair fall into his face. “You know what you are? A smartarse, that’s what you are.” And he sounds fairly certain about it, as he might as well.

“You’re not wrong,” Eric concedes and shrugs, causing his blanket to slip a little from his shoulder.

Viggo is silent for a moment as if pondering something.
“So, that makes us even then,” he concludes with meticulous patience of a school boy, who lets himself be temporarily distracted from a strop he was in.

“Whatever,” Eric grunts, straightens his cocoon again. He lets one hand on the beer, uses the other to drag the blanket back up to his nose. With a smile that is hidden by a 1970s flower design he suggests, “C’mon, tell me what you’ve been brooding about before you one up me again.”

Viggo weighs his head from one side to the other in utter slow motion. “I’m not sure I want to share this with you.”

“Fuck off, of course you do,” Eric laughs, a little indignation but no serious worry in his voice. “I told you about that rash I had; you owe me.”

“You can’t seriously consider that STD you got yourself fuck knows where to my philosophical thoughts on the nature of human beings,” Viggo points out.

Eric rolls his eyes heavenwards – oh, look there’s the Southern Cross! No, wait, just airplanes.

“Course I can,” he responds on autopilot, “knowing you it’ll all end in one big accusation against God anyhow. – And hey, that was not an STD; how many times, Viggo?”

He reckons that you can’t even see the Southern Cross from this far up North anyhow.

Viggo waits patiently until Eric has dragged his gaze back down from the sky to look at him once more.

“So, correct me if I’m wrong, you think that our relationship is defined by me being bullied into sharing my innermost soul with you and in return I get to hear about your so called rashes and listen to you insulting my faith?”

Eric’s laughter is a rush of hot air trapped in cotton fabric but Viggo hears him alright and smirks.

“Basically. Yes,” Eric agrees, then frowns. “Damn you, 1:2 on the semantics there. But seriously, if I didn’t make fun of you that’d be when you should be really worried.”

“Is that so?” Viggo asks and really, he sounds almost as if the concept of laughing at your best mate is new to him. Good actor, that Viggo Mortensen.

Eric plays along and patiently explains, “Course. Because I’m like the canned laughter to your sitcom. You only ever know whether what you told was good when I laugh.”

Eric can hear Viggo frown at that. “I’m not sure that simile made all that much sense,” Vig says doubtfully after a moment of consideration.

“Yeah, me neither.”

They fall silent again but it’s a different kind of silence. If Eric had a bit of a compulsive disorder and would get off on making lists (which he hasn’t and which he doesn’t, thank you; his last name is not ‘Bloom’), then he could probably come up with a good two handful of different silences between them. This, and he knows that as well as Viggo, is the one where Eric is waiting for Vig to sort through the jumbled flee market after a hurricane that he calls his brain. Eric is a patient man, it’s not like his numbers or equations change over the time, and he can wait on Viggo for days and weeks without snapping.

This time it doesn’t take Vig that long. Eric glances at him when the other man shifts in his seat and props his hands up on the armrests, and Eric grins when predictably Viggo growls as his
jumper catches on the splintered plastic and he has to yank himself free. He figures that this is one of those random incidents that will get him to talk.

“You think that either one of us will be remembered?” Viggo asks.

“Is that one of those fork-in-the-road decision questions?” Eric answers with quiet amusement, as Vig is still too busy glaring at his chair to look at him. “Where I disqualify myself as best mate with the wrong answer?”

“Nah,” Viggo replies dryly. “It was more a rhetorical one. You were supposed to keep your big mouth shut and let me talk.”

“Ramble,” Eric corrects.

The glare is redirected from the splintered arm rest to Eric’s face. “Whatever.”

“2:2. Just so you know,” Eric says smugly and turns his head away again.

He stares up at the stars and asks himself whether Viggo sees something different up there than he himself does (or doesn’t, the search for said Cross is pending). Stars, billions of years old, maybe dead and gone already as their light reaches Earth. Not so random, to think of perishability right now, right here.

“I do think we leave an impression,” Eric answers despite all that. “We’re teachers for fuck’s sake. We earn our living by permanently scaring generation after generation of helpless people of the future.” With a little smile he adds, “I coulda put that a little nicer.”

As if to prove his point there is some noise drifting through the still night air towards them. Some shrieks, laughter, chattering and the ultimate survival sound of the boarder, the shushing. In the building that is adjacent to their lawn, roomlights flicker on for seconds behind various windows before they are hastily doused again.

Viggo says, “I think that we only believe in God because we desperately want someone to notice us.”

Eric listens into the night but the sounds of the kids have died down again. Only Viggo’s words still echo in his mind.

“Hm,” he grunts, means ‘Go on’ and Viggo knows it.

“What I’m still undecided about,” Vig says, “is whether the same goes for love as well. You know, do we only ever want to have someone to love us, so there is someone to grieve over our grave.”

Eric turns his head again and looks at his friend, frowning. Viggo is peeling the label of his beer, tiny bits falling to the ground like snow, but he doesn’t seem particularly agitated.

“That’s kind of very cynical,” Eric replies.

Now, Viggo looks up and leaves his beer be for the time being. With one of his wide gestures that mean everything and nothing he insists.

“But I’m being serious, Eric. If you’d try to describe love, see whether you’d manage without words like ‘altruism’ or ‘feeling tenderness for someone’. But isn’t that as cliché, simplified and ultimately meaningless as the stylized heart that is supposed to symbolize it? Isn’t all we do for people that we want to love us – or continue to do so – just done to get a reaction out of them?
Whether that’s bringing home flowers or cheating on them?”

Despite his earlier joking around, Eric can very well tell the difference between questions that are rhetorical or the ones that Viggo really doesn’t have an answer to.

Still, something in Viggo’s inflection makes him respond, “Or dying so they can prove how much they liked us by going all Romeo on our dead Juliet arse?”

Viggo’s fingers have returned to peeling off the label and the small bead they have formed out of it is tossed into Eric’s direction now.

“That did sound cynical,” Viggo adds as they both watch the tiny pellet running down the uneven plains of the blanket.

“Sarcasm, baby,” Eric drawls, “huge difference.”

“3:2, fine,” Viggo concedes, calmer again. Eric has always known that his friend isn’t a cynic at heart either.

Again, the sound of unsuccessfully suppressed laughter interrupts the quiet of the night. This time it sounds closer and both Eric and Viggo turn their heads towards it. There’s ominous silence for a moment, then the leaves of a bush rustle and someone bursts out. It’s definitely a male someone, and Eric is pretty certain this is David Thompson. He is running across the lawn, shouting “woho”. He is cheered on by a bunch of voices from behind the bushes. Oh, and he is stark naked.

He stops dead in the middle of the lawn, and his arms freeze in mid motion like a windmill during dead calm when he spots Eric and Viggo.

Neither of the three moves for a moment, they all stare at one another and under his blanket, Eric thinks that cold nights are really unbecoming for the male anatomy.

Then Viggo raises a hand and waves at David and David Jr. The boy snaps his arms down to cover his crotch, then he turns tail and runs away. No ‘woho’ this time. Eric takes a drag of his beer and watches the hasty retreat. Viggo snickers.

“Your headspace is really a scary place sometimes,” Eric says absentmindedly because that comment has been stuck in his throat from before the little random flashing incident.

Viggo blinks in confusion. “Huh?”

Eric frowns and tries to remember the reason for the statement but when it comes to him again, he pushes the blanket down to his waist and turns towards Viggo with an incredulous impression on his face.

“I mean, sometimes that brain of yours regresses into the state of David Thompson’s. And you got nothing better to do than drag me down the pit of misery and bad hairstyles with you. I was a fucking moron at 17 – and now I’m supposed to have some superwise answers regarding life and love and shit. Some mate you are.”

Viggo looks at him a little wide eyed and in the dim light he certainly does not look his age right now. “Look, I didn’t –,” he starts but Eric waves him off.

“Shut up, I’m not done yet.” If Eric had also borrowed Viggo’s pillow he’d definitely throw it at the other man’s head right about now. “Look, point is, as per usual you’re incredibly right and incredibly stupid at the same time,” he explains.
“That is, I believe, mathematically impossible,” Viggo remarks, in his normal voice once more.

“See why this gets me in such a state?” Eric agrees with a half smile and raises his arms into the air in a sort of dramatic gesture. His finger is pointing at Viggo when he adds, “Next time we talk about Russel’s paradox.”

“Done,” Viggo chuckles and takes another sip of his beer.

Eric leans back in his chair again and huffs, not really annoyed. After a moment he says, “I think you’re right, though. We do look for approval all the time, and if you look closely, that is because we want to be recognized for the very special snowflake we all are.”

“The more of a dimwitted idiot you are, the more you depend on happily ever after?” Viggo asks without looking at him.

“Hey, I did not say that,” Eric protests.

“You kinda did.”

“But I didn’t mean it and you should have known, so zip it,” Eric grumbles. He still explains, without the unnecessary irony this time, “Because you’re enormously wrong at the same time. Mankind is, and I can’t believe I have to tell you that, all about instant gratification. This is why your God invented orgasms for women or we’d long have been extinct. That’s what love boils down to as well.”

“Orgasms?” Viggo asks. Eric has to grin – that would be some answer to the questions of the universe.

“That you feel good about yourself now,” he exemplifies however. “And maybe that you’ll do that till you die, alright.”

Viggo keeps looking at him with interest but he doesn’t reply anything. He scratches his shoulder, shifts in his chair but he doesn’t say anything.

Eric doesn’t like it.

“You know why I rendered you speechless for once?” he says, and it’s the opposite of triumph that colours his words. “It’s because that answer was just as 17 year old as the question. Can’t argue with universal statements and a firm believer, can you.”

“Just that neither of us actually is 17 any longer and believes any of the bullshit that comes out of your mouth,” Viggo replies and his mouth twitches.

Eric grins, relieved, and remembers the beer in his hand. “You’re just bitchy because I nailed you down for once, you evasive fucker.”

Suddenly about all the floor lights in the house opposite the lawn are switched on at once. And maybe it’s just this that makes the night sound even quieter for a moment. It’s like even the rustling of the leaves has stopped and everyone is breathlessly waiting for the inevitable. Eric surely is.

So, it’s not really all that much of a surprise when Sean’s bellow carries through some of the half open windows and possibly across all school grounds, very descriptively telling the kids where he is going to stick his foot if they aren’t in bed and sleeping within the next two minutes.

“So,” Viggo starts, even though his eyes too are still fixed on the boarding house, “you were just
admitting that you haven’t got a fucking clue and all your answers were strictly speaking radioactive waste. Go on.”

“Whatever man, semantics,” Eric replies, laughing. “I’m a mathematician; I just put my pink shades on, fondle pi and let you solve all philosophical riddles of life for the both of us.”

“Very sensible of you.”

“I know.”

“And generous.”

“That, too,” Eric agrees once again. He stretches his right leg a little further and kicks Viggo’s calf lightly, “Besides, I know you’d be fucked without your monthly crisis of faith.”

Viggo snorts but then glowers at him, not all that convincing. “You do realize that by calling it thus and mocking it you are effectively robbing me of my life’s purpose?”

“Aaw, poor you,” Eric coos patronizingly. “Go and have a good brood about it.”

“Yeah, and possibly an aneurism,” Viggo complains on the same level of seriousness, hand gestures included. “What would you do then?”

“Go to your funeral and cry at your grave,” Eric says and nods decisively.

“I’m touched,” Viggo replies, clutching his chest where his heart is.

Eric chuckles and nods again. “Mate, you really are touched.”

“4:3, damnit,” Viggo states but adds smugly, “You’d still cry big crocodile tears if I’d die,”

“I’d throw myself onto the coffin and demand to be buried with you,” Eric agrees with the easy lightheartedness of the truth in his voice.

“That’s the spirit,” Viggo says, smiling, and holds out his bottle in Eric’s direction. Eric risks sticking his arm out from under the blanket to click his own beer against Vig’s in a silent toast. Then he stretches his legs out and returns to gazing at the sky.

“Remind me again, do they have the Southern Cross over here?”

Viggo sighs, “And you call yourself a teacher.”

“Way to spoil the mood, reminding me of that,” Eric replies with a small groan. “We got that stupid staff meeting regarding GCSEs tomorrow – ,” he checks his watch and corrects himself, “- this afternoon, right?”

After a short moment of silence Viggo says, “I’ll pay you ten quid if you manage to weave ‘Mussolini’, ‘handstand’ and ‘kebab’ into the conversation.”

Eric grins broadly snuggles back under his blanket. “Easy as falling of a fucking log. Now shut up, I’m not done searching for that stupid Cross.”

Viggo shifts a few times in his seat as if slightly uncomfortable and then decides to stick his cold feet to Eric’s under the blanket. Eric doesn’t object to the invasion, just kicks Viggo’s shoe as a welcome.
You're all talk

Chapter Summary

Jackson College in December 2009

A polynomial is an expression that is constructed from one or more variables and constants, using only the operations of addition, subtraction, and multiplication, where repeated multiplication of the same variable is standardly denoted as exponentiation with a constant non-negative whole number exponent. For example, \(x^2 + 2x - 3\) is a polynomial in the single variable \(x\).

How hard is that to understand?

Bradley James stares at Eric.

Eric stares back.

Then he decides not to bother. He switches his attention to Marsha Griffin and holds out a piece of chalk invitingly. Marsha shifts in her seat and her face switches to ‘deer-in-headlights’ default mode. That makes Eric a fourteen wheeler speeding down the highway of mathematics – which would be cool if he wasn’t under the distinct impression that he is the only one still left on the road.

He looks over his shoulder at the blackboard and a friendly little expression smiles back at him, bravely ignoring the outrageous rejection it has to face right now. Eric turns back to his class and while Marsha still seems quick-frozen, Bradley is already busy shooting spit balls at Colin again. Eric combs through his hair with his free hand and if that should turn out to be grayer at the temples by the end of the lesson it’s not just because of the chalk on his fingers.

He reboots with a simpler explanation to make his kids understand and starts writing on the blackboard while he is talking.

Suddenly the door to his classroom is yanked open. Hand raised in mid-writing he glances over his shoulder and catches Viggo’s half-frantic, half-apologizing shrug as he storms into the room, towards Eric’s desk.

The pupils start whispering to one another, so Eric turns around to glare at them. They are acting as if they’d never seen Viggo before. Sure, he may usually not be rummaging through Eric’s bag like a desperate junkie looking for a fix. But that’s still no excuse for the quiet chattering Eric thinks.

Viggo capsizes the bag, still not having found what he is looking for. Eric tosses his piece of chalk at Bradley’s head because he’s the loudest of the chatterboxes (and because he wouldn’t be able to factor polynomials if his life depended on it and Eric feels offended on behalf of the expressions). Bradley makes an indignant squeaking sound and falls of his chair, flailing.

The rest of the class laughs in unison and while they are well occupied making fun of their fallen comrade, Eric fishes out Viggo’s mobile phone from under a pile of loose sheets of millimeter paper. He sort of knew it had been there – he’s packed it this morning after all, after finding it next to the loo in his flat.
To Viggo that seems like it is Christmas already and he has just unpacked the custom made San Lorenzo boxer shorts Eric is planning on giving him. He grasps the phone and for a moment he looks like he’s gonna give Eric one of his slobbery dog-lick-all-over-your-face kisses.

When he remembers that they are in class though, he just looks fondly at the half finished equation on the blackboard and then back at the collection of hopeless cases of dyscalculia in front of them. Eric just pulls a face, summing up his educative success so far. Then he tells Bradley to get up from the floor and (while he’s at it) to fetch him a new piece of chalk, please. Viggo grins and leaves the room, his most loved treasure back in the pocket of his trousers.

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Three weeks before Christmas Johnny suggests Secret Santa during breakfast break. Since everyone has agreed to it while Orlando is on the loo, Orlando is a bit put out by the decision.

“Oi, I proposed the same thing two weeks ago,” he says and slaps the back of Sean’s head lightly, mostly because it is the nearest for him to reach. “And you were all ‘nah, that’s stupid, Orlando’.”

“You already suggested it?” Johnny says and scratches the imagined beard on his chin. “Was I present?”

“You voted against it,” Karl reminds him merrily and grins at Orlando so that Sean, trapped between them, automatically flinches, expecting another slap.

“It’s not a proper gift exchange,” Eric explains, uncharacteristically helpful. “We invest most of the money in booze and that goes to whoever comes up with the crappiest gift.”

“So basically,” Sean says, “it’s like Christmas parties in sixth form.”

“Yay,” Viggo concludes and amiably pats Orlando’s shoulder, the photocopies in his hand accidentally hitting Orlando’s cheek. “Are you in?”

Orlando crosses his arms in front of his chest stares through a window of the staff room, decorated with self made snow stars, and scowls. “Bugger off.”

“Is it because I voted against you?” Johnny asks and as per usual no one, including himself, is sure whether he is serious.

“It’s ‘cause he’s afraid to royally suck and lose,” Eric says, very seriously.

“You suck royally,” Orlando responds with all the maturity he can muster and sits down next to Sean again.

The others coo at him which he chooses to ignore, then they go back to discussing the rules of the gift exchange. If any pupil would enter the staff room now they’d probably immediately drop out of school – it seems highly implausible that this lot (that enthusiastically fights over whether expired sausages are allowed to be gifted) is capable of supervising valuable education.

Orlando carefully goes through his notes on Adam Smith, eats an apple and pushes a pile of untidy, dog eared history books back onto Sean’s part of the table. They keep shuffling over to him, probably seeking exile from the anarchy that is Sean’s brain. When Orlando has finished his apple, expired food is excluded from the gifts list and so are services from prostitutes, performed during assembly hour.

“Why should I partake if there’s not even the possibility of sex in it for me?” argues Bernard who
just joined them and who can never let anything go but the others ignore him.

“Nothing more expensive than a fiver,” Eric decides, “there needs to be enough money for
booze.”

“And it’s Secret Santa, we all agree on that,” Johnny adds, stating a fact that so far no one has
disputed anyhow.

“Can we force people to play?” Karl asks, probably not actually because he wants Orlando to
partake but mostly because he obviously enjoys bullying people into doing stuff (which explains
his choice of teaching subject).

“Duh,” Viggo answers and sounds as well as looks like an exasperated female sixth former.
“’Course.”

“So, we’re all in, obviously,” Eric says and points at himself and Johnny, Vig, Sean, Karl,
Bernard and Orlando who has just smuggled the remains of his apple onto Sean’s saucer and licks
his fingers in resignation. “Who else? Liv, Mir, Harry, Mads –“

“Dom, Billy, Cate,” Sean adds, frowning because due to Orlando’s waste disposal he can’t set his
teccup down again.

“Dominic, Christopher,” Johnny goes on and doesn’t seem to notice that everyone stares at him.

“Wait a moment,” Karl interrupts. “Since when do we include Christopher in anything? Didn’t we
officially vote him the Evil Bitch of the East over Halloween?”

“Wicked Witch from the West, you philistine,” Bernard corrects automatically.

“And speaking of, if Dominic West is in,” Sean says cautiously, “I insist that we have a ‘no
bombs’ rule as well.”

“I’m still certain he didn’t mean to set your ceiling on fire,” Orlando says reasonably. Sean doesn’t
appear to be reassured but painfully aware of how being a physics teacher doesn’t mean that you
should be left alone with electricity and Sean’s new torchiere.

“Christopher should get some love,” Johnny says, dragging the subject back to the assistant
headmaster, and gets a lot of grimaces in response.

The school bell rings and instantly everyone gets shifty.

“Has anyone seen my photocopies? The ones for the theatre trip?” Viggo asks the world in
general and scratches his head.

“Did I cover Pythagoras already…?” Eric asks himself in particular, glancing at his lesson plan
which he’s just placed atop of Vig’s photocopies.

Sean finishes his tea and gets up, “Karl, if you see Peter Baker, could you remind the little shit that
he was supposed to pick up his homework?”

Karl just nods, stuffs his hands into the pockets of his trackies and turns to walk off. Everyone else
starts to follow suit. Open books, half empty cups, remains of breakfast are left behind.

And Orlando.

“Er, guys?” he asks, the only one still seated. Heads are turned his way automatically but most of
hasn’t really focused on him, concentration on the next lesson already. Orlando lets out a long suffering sigh.

“Has anyone of you idiots prepared the draw yet? Christmas is in three weeks; tick tock. – Jesus!”

***

If you follow the gravel path that connects the new buildings with the main schoolhouse there is a small trampled down path leading straight across the lawn. Sneakily it seems to disappear behind a bush but if you follow it faithfully it will lead you all the way around and to the back of the old Georgian house’s side wing. You can still hear the crunching sound of feet on the gravel and the accompanying but lighter chattering of young voices. But you are secluded from view almost altogether.

When Viggo and Sean first came to the school – back in the 1980s and both not really having planned to land here but being content about it anyway – this was the secret hideaway for smokers. During breaks and in the evenings pupils would huddle together conspiratorially and share the forbidden fruit that was Marlboro’s or Silk Cuts which they had bought in the village.

It was a bit of an elitist affair (like most things teenagers do) and Viggo remembers Sean saying that there was nothing more amusing than having rounds on a balmy summer night – the sudden appearance of a teacher changed the so very cool almost-adults that carefully casually leaned against the brick wall into stuttering and shuffling kids, hurrying to explain that ‘No, sir, of course we weren’t smoking’.

Nowadays, sixth formers who want to tar their lungs do it in the courtyard behind the chemistry lab. It’s not a secretive thing any longer, the school board has granted the older kids permission to smoke on school grounds in designated areas. Viggo reckons this is supposed to be a clever act of psychology – if you allow teenagers to do something, they most likely won’t do it.

The place behind the bushes close to the gravel walk is no such designated area which is why Viggo can have his cigarette in peace here. Undisturbed by kids and their drama and colleagues and their complaints about how said drama kept said kids from doing their homework.

Today Ian is out on the hunt, reassigning the most unpopular duties to unsuspecting victims, so yeah, it’s been a bit of a crappy morning altogether.

The sky tries its best to be blue but the reticent winter sun doesn’t quite reach him. His fingers protest against the icy cold; he rubs them together before they, stiffly, perform the service of lighting his cigarette. He inhales the first drag with the self conscious, hedonistic pleasure of an addict. He leans back against the cold brick wall, his hands disappearing into his thick coat’s pockets again, thumbs hiding in fists.

He’s fifty-one and it is fricking cold, he has seven minutes max before he has to get back inside to teach Christian values. And it’s not like a cigarette in a semi secluded area can change all that, make him feel sixteen and like the king of the world again.

Still. He exhales through the corner of his mouth, teeth holding the fag in place. Could be worse.

Gravel is kicked up and the sound is coming closer before it dies down completely, grass muffling the footsteps now. Viggo’s eyes are trained on the patch between the bushes and he’s not surprised, sucks in smoke and lets it fester in his lungs, when Eric appears around the corner.

The other man has his shoulders hunched angrily and kicks a piece of forlorn broken shingle with a little too much force. Viggo watches him come closer, towards him, and thinks to himself that
Eric’s quite good at imitating a pissed off sixteen year old right now. His glasses are slightly askew as they get when he fiddles with them in agitation. When he grunts something that resembles either ‘hello’ or ‘fucking hell’, Viggo remembers that he has been afraid to be assigned to lesson plan scheduling – a job that Vig wouldn’t even wish upon the devil.

Eric leans against the wall next to him and Viggo turns his head to arch an inquisitive brow. Eric rolls his eyes in response – all the hatred for administrative duty bundled up in one single expression. Viggo’s answering commiseration is darkened by smoke and he chuckles lowly when Eric kicks the lower part of the wall in frustration.

Viggo returns to enjoying his cigarette and squints against the almost whitish color of the sky. It hasn’t changed one single bit over all these years. Eventually, Eric makes a low whining sound in the back of his throat and in resigned defeat he thuds his forehead onto Viggo’s shoulder. Vig would pat his head in heartfelt sympathy but his fingers just can’t be persuaded to come out of their snug hiding place again.

***

Viggo soaks up the last of the gravy on his plate with a piece of bread. Then he finishes the absolute rest of it by putting his tongue to the china. It’s rather disgusting, Karl thinks, and he forces his pupils to cake themselves in mud every other day.

“It’s a compliment to the cook,” Viggo says as he peeks over the rim of the porcelain and finds eyes resting on him. “It’d actually be impolite if I didn’t lick it off.”

“Right,” says Orlando in exactly the same tone of voice he uses on his kids and it makes Sean grin.

“You got gravy on your nose,” says Karl around a toothpick.

“I’m glad to hear you liked it,” Eric shouts from the kitchen.

“You didn’t even cook it,” Harry shouts back. “So, shut up.”

“My flat, I get to keep the flowers and the compliments,” Eric replies.

Not that anyone got him flowers. Dinner at Eric’s usually consists of everyone bringing the contents of their fridge to his flat and laying them out on the table. And in a process that is as unfathomable to Karl as rugby rules are to his all girls class, it is usually Harry and Viggo deciding on what to create out of that. Eric is, in fact at no point involved in the cooking. It’s just that his dining table is the biggest and most of the appliances in his kitchen still work, that’s why they’re here.

Viggo burps.

“Thank you, thank you,” Eric says and appears in the doorframe to the kitchen. “You’re too kind.”

Sean tosses a bread crust in Eric’s general direction and Harry claps when he hits him in the head with it.

“I’m actually quite amazed that I grew up to be a half way decent person,” Orlando says dryly, following the spectacle, “with you guys bringing me up, more or less.”

“You’re not a decent person,” Karl points out. “You stole money from me just yesterday.”
“Somewhere in that book,” Viggo says, meaning the bible,” it says you shouldn’t rip off your mates. I’m pretty certain.”

“Those kinds of rules never applied to Orlando,” Sean cuts in and Orlando glares at him.

“I didn’t steal it,” he defends himself, “it’s not my fault that you were betting on Eric.”

“You had money on me?” Eric says and leans back on his chair that seems as per usual too small for him. “Naaaw, that’s so sweet!” He leans over to ruffle Karl’s hair.

Karl lets him and only when he’s finished he slaps him for it. “Keep your filthy hands off me,” he growls. “I’ll get you a t-shirt for Christmas, reading LOSER, you loser.”

“What exactly earned me that title?”

“One on one footie match during second break,” Harry says and gives Eric another mental nudge, “You and Jamie Thompson. Yesterday. In the outer court.”

Realization dawns on Eric’s face and he replies, eyebrow arched. “I was playing keepy uppy with a first year and you were betting on that? Don’t you have anything better to do?”

“You let a toddler kick your arse,” Sean points out again, ever helpful, and finishes his beer. “Don’t try to deflect the matter.”

“I was,” Eric says very slowly, “humoring an 11 year old kid. Not trying to make it into premier league.”

Karl shares a look with Sean. Harry and Orlando snicker quietly and predictably Eric turns to Viggo with a shrug for assistance.

“I’m truly sorry, mate,” Viggo says. “If I had been there I’d most definitely have stopped them from conducting this ridiculous business. Or faithfully have money on you. As it happens, I was talking Martin Potter through his rough breakup with Kathy Nighly.”

“Were there tears?” Eric asks with something like malicious glee.


“Why do people always come to you for counseling?” Orlando asks and it sounds like scientific interest, not envy. “Hardly anything that comes out of your mouth makes any sense. Ever.”

“Atheist,” Viggo suggests.

“Did he just compare himself to God?” Karl asks in a stage whisper and Sean nods slowly.

“Papist,” Orlando spits out with the contempt of, well, an atheist. “Well? What brings people to cry their heart out to you?”

“My dazzling good looks and endless wisdom?” Viggo suggests.

“Or your appealing humility,” Eric adds.

“Or that,” Viggo agrees.

“Didn’t you go for counseling to Father Viggo when you were younger?” Sean asks Orlando. He also looks like he can’t decide whether to get himself another beer and then decides to simply steal Orlando’s.
“Bugger off,” Orlando says, letting him, “you know perfectly well to whom I went.”

“Is that ‘cause only Sean understands your fixation on blondes with huge double D knockers?” Karl asks innocently.

“You mean you won’t like the porn DVD I got you for Christmas?” Orlando asks sweetly and adds, more himself which means with more mockery in his voice, “You’d have preferred it if I’d come to you then?” And damn him, he knows perfectly well how much Karl hates having to be ‘pat pat on your shoulder, it’s gonna be alright, pal’ towards pupils.

“Do you have special counseling for double D fixations?” Harry asks Sean, ignoring the staring match to his right.

“No,” Orlando answers before Sean can open his mouth. “He takes great care in teaching all his kids how to properly drown their sorrows in booze.”

“Sod off, you lying little shit,” Sean laughs. “I never did that.”

“You got me drunk on a daily basis when I had my last crisis of faith,” Viggo points out.

“You broke into my flat and raided my liquor cabinet,” Sean patiently corrects.

“I didn’t break in,” Viggo says. “Well, maybe the first night.”

“I gave him the key after that,” Eric explains. “Vig was too pained to pick a lock.”

Vig nods emphatically and opens himself another bottle of beer.

“He has a key to your flat?” Orlando asks, pointing at Eric and looking at Sean. “Are you insane?”

“He made him promise to only use it in case of emergency,” Karl explains, smirking, and Orlando grins broadly. Sean crosses his arms in front of his chest and Karl pats him on the shoulder consolingly.

“Do you buy the ‘I’ll pull out before I cum, I promise’, too?” Viggo asks with the condescending kindness of a year long mentor. “Honestly, Sean.”

“You’re all idiots,” Sean decides and picks his napkin from his lap to throw it onto his empty plate. “I’m leaving. I got my A-level group first thing tomorrow anyway.”

“Is Colin Morgan keeping up?” Orlando asks, effortlessly switching to professional concern even at ten in the evening.

Sean shrugs. “Yeah, sorta. He’s definitely not stupid just –“

“Actually, he is quite bright,” Orlando cuts in and it’s not just Karl who hears the mother-lioness growl in the other teacher’s voice. Sean merely smiles and nods, so Orlando concedes easily enough, “Just lazy as they come, I agree. Kick his arse, he can do better.”

“Aye aye sir, house master,” Sean says mockingly but means it and gets up. “You want a ride back to school?”

“No, I’ll stay and play Peeping Tom at Eric’s bedroom window,” Orlando replies dryly. “Watch him do indecent things to his calculator.”
“Hey, my calculator deserves all the love it can get,” Eric points out. Karl can’t really see the other man’s hands but he’d bet good money that Eric is fondling the small calculator as they speak.

Orlando ignores Eric and says, in belated response to Sean’s original question, “Of course I do.”

Harry follows suit and gives Karl a nudge. “You walking me home or what?”

Karl just growls in response.

“Well, thanks for cooking,” Viggo says to Harry and rubs his stomach. “Feel free to do it again tomorrow.”

Eric groans and finishes the rest of his beer before he gets to his feet, ever the good host (hah). “Would you mind consulting me first before inviting people into my kitchen to demolish it? Who’s gonna do the dishes, eh?”

On cue, Karl gets up as well. “I think I have rounds,” he says.

“Bullshit,” Viggo and Eric reply in unison. Karl just smiles what he personally thinks is his sweetest smile.

“Shall I give you a hand?” Sean asks Eric, offer genuine even though he’s already at the door. Honestly, sometimes Karl wonders whether during those years as an aspiring football pro Sean’s gotten hit in the head with a ball a bit too often.

“Nah, I’ll let all of it soak till tomorrow,” Eric replies.

They say their good nights and Karl’s the last to leave the flat. He glances over his shoulder and half expects Viggo to be nose deep in the pan in which Harry prepared the meat and the gravy. However, Vig is in fact crouching on the floor in front of the TV set, fiddling with a blank disk from the back pocket of his jeans.

Eric asks eagerly, “Did you tape cricket?”

If Karl were Orlando and had memorized the school rules like some sort of evening prayer he’d probably remind the two of them that it’s actually a school night. As it is he grins at Eric and says ‘cheers’ instead of ‘sleep well’ before he jogs down the stairs to catch up with Harry. Fucker would be walking half across town without him otherwise.

***

A leatherbound bible may be many things, a good pillow it is not. Mind, Eric isn’t partial about the other possible uses for that book either but he’s not as flamingly opposed to it as, say, Orlando who thinks that the only good use for it is throwing it at Viggo’s head.

Eric groans because thinking of Orlando is not on his list of things to do on the perfect morning. In fact, if a fairy would show up right now, sit on the side cushion of the worn corduroy couch that he is lying on and grant him three wishes, they’d probably be these:

1. Not think of workmates (let alone work) before coffee,
2. Never again have to sleep on Viggo’s bible and
3. Never again wake up with that ferret-died-in-my-mouth taste of morning breath.

Yeah, he could’ve just brushed his teeth before sleep and he could’ve just stayed away from the onion rings and the Cuban cigars that Vig got from God knows where and that they thought a
good idea to smoke a 2 a.m. while watching a Wheel Of Fortune re-run. Thinking about it, instead of crashing on Vig’s couch he could’ve just slept in his own bed where the possibility on denting his cheek on the word of God is minimized since he doesn’t even own a bible.

Eric groans again, shifts and nearly falls of the couch. If that forced a noise out of him that bore resemblance to one of those squeaky toys for pets, he will firmly deny it (once he’s properly awake). The sounds of the rest of the world start rushing in, sort of like someone has flushed the toilet.

He squeezes his eyes shut because he does not want to wake up, damnit. He has a shitload of work to do today and a dubious one-on-one conversation with Ian scheduled. Besides, he can clearly hear the shower running (and what’s more, Viggo’s voice – who the heck sings choir songs under the shower anyway?) which means taking a piss needs to wait as well.

He exchanges dozing for self-pity once the shower has been turned off. And he has made it into a sitting position, the plaited blanket still draped over most of him, when Viggo comes out of the bathroom.

The bright yellow hotel towel that Vig ‘accidentally’ packed at the end of their Mallorca holiday is carefully wrapped around his head, and it is the sole thing he’s wearing. He is still humming an unintelligible melody, scratches his chest absentmindedly, and is half way through the living room before he even notices Eric. Who has no problems translating his sound of contemplative surprise to ‘Huh, have you been there ten minutes ago?’

Eric just grunts in affirmation and rubs his eyes with his fist. He’s not the person to sneak into someone else’s living room at 6.30 to sit on their couch and do inappropriate things to their bible while being confronted with its naked owner. Obviously.

He’s more the person who is too lazy to go all the way to their car and drive all the way into the village to their inconveniently situated flat. Or the person who prefers the sound of Viggo’s snores coming from the other room over silence and solitude and hence not once this week slept alone. But that’s neither here nor there.

Viggo reappears from his bedroom, without the towel but dressed in jeans now, and starts clattering in the small kitchen. The sound of the bubbling percolator brings a hopeful sigh to Eric’s lips. He produces the bible from where it has slipped half under his arse and puts it onto the coffee table, right next to the overflowing ashtray.

Then he resigns himself to the fact that he needs to get up and presentable since the only edible things within reach are stale beer puddles and some singular onion rings on the carpet. Neither look like Champion breakfast.

***

“And I told my darling wife that she would never get me on this horse again since it was most definitely determined to kill me,” Bernard says as the bus bucks on the uneven street and Sean feels slightly seasick already. “It will not surprise you however, that five minutes later I was on the horse and off the horse again, since I couldn’t resist neither her pleas nor the blasted animal’s bucking.”

“I don’t think,” Sean replies, “that it needs a lot of that to get you to fall off.”

“Shut your slanderous mouth,” Bernard laughs and looks at Sean with a frown of indignation.

“There is nothing wrong with preferring the solid ground under one’s feet,” Viggo adds from the
other side of the aisle. Bernard leans forward a little to look at him and Sean can see the doubt on
the older man’s face. With Viggo he is certainly well advised to be skeptical.

“Oh, in your case,” Viggo continues, without looking up from the mobile phone in his hand,
“under your face.”

Sean tries to hide a smirk, well knowing that he isn’t all that successful, and adds in his most
reasonable of voices, “Vig has a point. Your face seems to like ending boozing nights in close
proximity to questionable puddles on the ground.”

“Mr. Hill can’t hold his liquor?” someone quips up from the rows of seats behind them. Instantly,
Bernard jumps up (nearly bumps his head against the too low ceiling) and frowns at the pupils
behind them. Sean has to bite his bottom lip to not interrupt the sudden silence in the bus with his
snickering and Viggo’s sporting a huge grin as well.

“I beg your pardon?” Bernard booms in his best I-wanted-to-become-headmaster-but-instead-am-
stuck-with-training-the-footie-team voice. “Would the enquirer be so kind to repeat his question?
To my face.”

Sean is pretty certain that it was Martin Banks who has been so suicidal to question Bernard’s
drinking abilities, but not one of the pupils says a thing for a long moment.

“Excuse me, Mr. Hill,” a girl’s voice breaks the silence, “do we have some time for shopping
before the play starts?”

Bernard growls and Sean really can’t hold back his snicker anymore. The other man sits back
down and there is amusement painted all over his face as he glances at Sean.

“There is money. Spend it, spend it, spend more,” Viggo says, loud and to the world in general,
even though Sean supposes that the reference to the ‘Wives of Windsor’ is wasted on the crowd of
5th years behind them.

Sean half turns in his seat, so he can look down the aisle and translates, “You have about an hour.
I’ll give you your tickets right before we arrive, so you only have to make sure you’re back in
time.”

“Yay,” says Katie McGrath, the prospect of shopping obviously at least a little more appealing
than a night in the theatre.

“Just don’t buy more shoes,” Sean says to her with a smile. “I have it on good authority that you
have too many already.”

Katie merely arches one eyebrow, but Angel Coulby right next to her leans over, so she’s in
Sean’s eyesight and says sweetly, “Mr. Bloom said that, didn’t he? Mr. Bean, that’s because he
only owns one pair of Chucks. Clearly he doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

“I’ll tell him that you implied that he had smelly feet,” Sean chuckles.

Angel quickly shakes her head, her curls bouncing, “I never said that!”

“Who is he gonna believe,” Hamish Cross says to her from two rows back, “You or his best mate,
eh?”

“Orlando,” Sean hears Viggo muttering to himself while texting, “doesn’t believe anything
anyone says.”
“Mr. Bean!” Angel pleads imploringly and Sean is once more faced with the evidence of Orlando’s impact on the girls. “Please, you wouldn’t!”

“He won’t,” Bernard booms, “as long as you’re on time for the play, Angel.”

Sean turns back around and leans back in the old bus seat. Bernard looks at him, one eyebrow arched and a biscuit between his lips. “Smelly feet? Low, Sean.”

Sean smiles to himself and is about to answer something when Viggo laughs out loud.

“Eric says,” he explains and raises his mobile phone slightly by way of explanation, “that relatedly he’d like us to buy foot deodorant for his Secret Santa recipient.”

***

The hallways of the old building are high, the floor is solid stone and both provide an excellent echo. You don’t hear it during the day, are used to the footsteps and voices coming from everywhere, but it seems that during the night every sound is louder. Especially when you’re trying really hard to be quiet.

The staircases are the worst and Viggo would compliment Eric on sounding like a dying dinosaur, panting open mouthed, if he weren’t so fucking out of breath himself. Fucking Germans and their fucking quality workmanship. Fucking Sean for not owning one of those Japanese bikes that surely are made mostly out of plastic.

They temporarily park the ‘borrowed’ bike while they try to get some air into their lungs again. Viggo’s throat hurts and he can’t remember when his heart has ever beaten that painfully hard against his ribcage. Eric leans against the wall, half bending over with his hands on his thighs and his shoulders are heaving. It takes Viggo a second to catch it – he's in a bit of pain here after all. But then Eric looks over to him and the moon provides a perfect spotlight onto his face which is contorted with silent laughter, his shoulders still shuddering.

Viggo grins back, wipes sweat from his forehead and his hands imitate the grip around the handlebar, wrists twisting, and all that his lips wanna do is purr like the healthy engine of Sean’s motorbike. Its chrome appliances shine in the blueish light; they’ve almost made it to the classrooms.

When they get the bike to its destination Viggo is feeling slightly lightheaded. A cocktail of that bit of too much nightcap they had, the brilliant futility of this entire enterprise and the exhaustion after having hauled so much dead weight up so many stairs.

They park Sean’s darling right in front of his blackboard, still full of Sean’s near unreadable scribble about early industrialization. Then Viggo carefully places his small Secret Santa gift onto the bike’s seat; the green parcel contains a brand new pink bicycle bell. He rearranges the bow on top of the parcel, glances over to Eric. The other man’s quiet amusement is so obvious to Viggo – even though he is always much quieter than Vig who really just likes to make use of the echo in the hallway by hollering loudly every once in a while when he has rounds – and Eric’s huge grease smeared hand rests on his shoulder as they admire their work. Viggo decides it can’t get much better than that in life.

They leave as silently as they’ve come (properly lock the classroom up again, too), all but tip-toe down the stairs and the deserted hallways, carefully lock the main door behind them after they’ve stepped out of it.

It’s only half way back across the school grounds on the way to Viggo’s flat that they
simultaneously lose it and stumble over their own feet because of it. Viggo coughs and helplessly snickers at the same time and Eric sits in the dew damp grass and is sobbing with laughter.

Of course Viggo is well aware that it’ll take Sean less than a second to figure out who exactly has desecrated his motorbike. He will curse a blue streak and call them the stupidest motherfucking imbeciles of the country. And then, he’ll consult Orlando and Karl and they’ll trick the kids of their houses into taking horrible revenge on Eric and Viggo.

Ah well, Viggo thinks as he holds out a hand to help Eric to get up again. Worth it.

***

“Good, good,” McKellan says as a conclusion for the last voting of the day. “Let us then move on to the last point on the agenda for today. Does anyone have any announcements to make?”

As the headmaster looks into the round of assembled teachers, Dominic does the same. Not really because he is interested in the discussion, he has long ago decided that when it comes to staff meetings it’s best to just not listen to anything and later vote with the majority. That’s terribly responsible of him, he knows that, and he’d probably be banned from several colleagues’ blogs’ friendslists (if any of these retarded fuckers owned a computer) for his incredibly responsible behavior in the field of active democracy.

Anyway, he quickly glances around and sees the raised hands of Billy, the loony drama teacher whatshisface, Bernard, and Viggo who has dragged up Orlando’s unwilling arm. Dominic does a quick calculation of how much more time in this stuffy room with these weird people that means for him before he can go and prepare his experiments for tomorrow.

“Mr. Boyd,” McKellan says, inviting the other man to speak.

Billy gets up from his seat (not that it makes much difference, short fellow that he is), clears his throat and says, “I got nothing that needs a quick decision, so don’t fret. But,” Billy continues after a few chuckles from the others, “as the head of the music department, I’ve been talking to some of you already about a joined musical project. And the general consensus seemed to be that we’re in dire need of a school musical next year. Johnny and I would like to hear the opinion of the rest of the staff on that.”

And even though the request is clear to anyone who hasn’t already nodded off (which means: everyone except for Lee, Dominic notes) the loony drama bloke gets up as well. Dominic is just glad he’s not sitting at his table because the guy likes to wave his hands frantically while trying to explain whatever idiocy he has come up with.

“What my good friend and comrade in arms is trying to recommend warmly – heatedly, scorchingly – to you,” Johnny says, “is that the time has come for music and performing art to blend, conflate, amalgamate in harmony. To form a union. Without the strikes and the constant shouts for pay raises. Like a marriage. Without the sex though, although that I reckon depends on your marriage. Right?”

Without blinking Billy turns back to the general audience.

“Yes. – Opinions?”

Dominic sees five hands being raised and sighs to himself – so much for finally getting something to eat. Gerard next to him chuckles while strictly avoiding eye contact with him, but Dominic knows the bastard is laughing at his pain like he usually does.

“I like the idea. I think…” Orlando says, which inevitably followed by, “But…” Dominic zones
out again as the other man does his usual thing of asking questions that aren’t of any interest at all to any sensible person (and by that Dominic obviously means himself).

Sean half turns to Orlando who is sitting right next to him as it’s his turn to speak. “While I understand Orlando’s concern regarding the myriad of projects we already got lined up, I still think that –“

Dominic wants to bang his head onto his desk and only doesn’t because stupid Gerard has parked his textbooks right there. It’s always the bloody fucking same. Orlando says one thing and Sean disagrees. Or, alternatively, Sean says another thing and Orlando disagrees. Then Karl, who obviously has been listening even less than that Dominic himself because half the times he doesn’t even know what they are talking about, then Karl just plain out agrees with Sean, mostly (Dominic suspects) because he likes to piss off Orlando. Who is very easy to piss off since he takes everything so damn serious.

“Thanks, lads,” Billy says just as Dominic zones back in. “We’ll think about that, appreciate the input. Anyone else?”

Dominic risks glancing at Eric and Viggo. Those two have the tendency to keep Dominic from returning to his lab by playing some stupid game during staff meetings that apparently only they understand. It involves contributions to the discussion that make no fucking sense at all to anyone and usually it ends up with Eric nearly choking on his ill-concealed laughing fit.

Today, however, Dominic seems lucky: Viggo just nods appreciatively at the music teacher’s idea and Eric, as per usual, follows suit. So, Billy just nods and sits back down as McKellan already gave the floor to Bernard.

The English teacher doesn’t even bother to get up from his chair (which gives Dominic some small hope of not starving to death). He merely clears his throat and announces,

“I’d just like to address anyone of you band of buggered assembled here who doesn’t have a life outside of school and hence decided to stay here over Christmas and New Year: You’re invited to my wife’s quaint shindig to celebrate the latter. I’d advise you to bring your own canapés and Perrier, however.”

There are appreciative hums and a few claps to be heard and McKellan, apparently suddenly determined to finish before midnight for a change, nods at Orlando who is the next and last on the list of speakers.

Orlando frowns but Viggo elbows him and says half loud, “A speech is in order, isn’t it?”

“Secret Santa is your baby, your responsibility,” Eric agrees with a grin and adds a little louder, “Come on, Orlando, speech.”

Orlando merely rolls his eyes and looks at the other two, a rather obvious wtf? expression. Instead of Orlando and his rather intimidating rhetorical skills the audience now gets Karl (who is less rhetorically skilled but just as intimidating). The P.E. teacher rolls his eyes and simply hollers,

“Open your presents, you all. Now.”

Dominic supposes that this is the most effective way to end a staff meeting in 0.2 seconds. He appreciates it a lot.

***

Some pupils stayed in the school over the holidays but none of them dare to come near them
tonight. Eric supposes they decided that they don’t need to see their A-level English teacher trying
to do a limbo dance.

They celebrate New Year’s Eve at the place that Bernie and his wife own in the village. Every
available surface inside of their house is covered in books (as per usual) and decorations and
(more importantly) glasses that are simply placed on top of it all. There’s loud music helpfully
undermining any sensible conversation and it floats through the half open windows.

Now it’s past midnight and Eric is just not drunk enough to be able to handle Harry’s thoughts on
Plato. He is too drunk, however, to keep up with Karl’s and Sean’s weird conversation that he
suspects is about their characters in WoW. Deciding that most of the people he considers friends in
this hemisphere are complete freaks, he helps himself to a glass and half a bottle of whiskey and
goes in search of Viggo.

New Year’s parties always resemble a balloon blown up to the fullest – it makes a good racket
when let go at the right time and is all over the place for a few seconds, a big hoot all around.
Then it lies around on the floor, feels sorry for itself and looks much like a used condom. Greeting
the New Year is a bit of a disgusting affair if you ask Eric.

It’s rather warm outside actually and Eric has this new theory about fireworks and their effect on
global warming as he steps onto the premises. He doesn’t have to look for his friend for too long.

Right next to the tiny pond there is a white bench, the highlight of the little park probably. Viggo
sits on its back, his feet on the seat and he’s doing exactly nothing. He must’ve heard Eric’s
approach though because he doesn’t fall off when he’s shoved from behind – for that to succeed,
Eric should be working on his stealth tactics. Vig merely growls and glances in his direction from
under the low rim of his woolen hat and too long dirty blond strands. Eric grins brightly and holds
up his liquid booty and he supposes that’s the reason why Viggo’s boot doesn’t kick him in the
arse when he sits down on the bench.

He doesn’t ask what Viggo is doing here. It’s precisely 0.54 which means it’s by far too late for
the good intentions business. Those are about as useful as aforementioned used condom anyway.
Viggo has said to him one really late night (when they had the brilliant idea of fastening an extra
bolt to Christopher’s classroom door) that people get what they deserve; and people are who they
are. Vig put it a bit more eloquent and there’s a high possibility that God and his endless love for
mankind was involved in there somewhere as well. Eric remembers the gist of it: You are who
you are. Stop whining about it and beating yourself up by trying to come up with stupid good
intentions. You should just man up and be who you wanna be, full stop.

A nudge against his shoulder pulls him out of his contemplations. Viggo has used his knee for that
and now that he has Eric’s attention he makes a ‘pass the booze’ gesture. Or so Eric supposes, it’s
a bit hard to tell what with the thermo gloves that Vig’s wearing. In any case, he unscrews the
bottle and pours a good deal of the whiskey into the one glass that he brought. The golden liquid
catches the light of the nearby streetlight as he passes the glass and keeps the bottle. Viggo makes
a quiet, pleased sound at the first sip.

So, all in all it’s a pretty fucking good thing that neither he nor Viggo bother with good intentions
– to stop boozing or smoking. Or to vow to attempt having a serious relationship with someone
else besides themselves and each other maybe (which is the same thing).

That’s the thing about Viggo really, the one thing you gotta understand and honestly, it’s so damn
logical. Viggo is the most self involved and altruistic person that Eric knows. He offers the
hardest and most honest words of criticism even when he’s not been asked for it. At the same
time Orlando’s observation was dead on (like most of Orlando’s thoughts): People constantly
come to him for comfort as well. Viggo considers it an evening well spent if he planned some
prank that will make Eric nearly piss his pants with laughter and everyone else call him a mentally retarded first year. Vig’s also the one that can spend months on trying to figure out the perfect birthday gift for you – and if you end up with nothing at all sometimes that’s just because Vig’s a perfectionist when it comes to these things.

Eric rolls his shoulders against the cold and because this bench has much in common with other furniture and is a tad too small for him. He takes a swig from his bottle and can’t help but purr at the strong, warm and rough taste of the whiskey in the back of his throat. Viggo’s thigh is pushed against his shoulder, solid, spreading warmth. Eric licks the taste of malt from his chapped lips and half turns his head to see whether Vig might like a refill.

Sometimes, yeah, Viggo regresses into a sixteen year old emo kid who howls at the moon and writes bad poetry. Or good poetry for all Eric knows, he has no clue about that shit and Viggo’s stuff doesn’t even rhyme. Good or bad, it doesn’t matter because even when he’s like that and for example sitting all by himself in the dark with his think-face on, he’s still making more sense than most other people Eric knows.

So, he lets Viggo ramble and understands it, even if his part of the conversation can be summed up with some grunts and nods. Or he forces alcohol down Viggo’s throat until Vig sees the wrongs of his ways. Sometimes (and this happens more often than this might sound now) they actually have a meaningful conversation – after Eric has made fun of Viggo for his impersonation of Edward whatshisname, the sparkling vampire.

Viggo’s glass is still half full and Eric relaxes again, content to stare at the ripples on the pond’s surface. He stretches his legs out, heels digging easily into the gravel. Tonight, he just lets Vig brood and maybe feel a little gloomy and melancholic. Because sometimes you need that, too.

***
"I knew it! I knew it, I knew it, I knew it!"

It’s not like Colin hasn’t been living with Bradley for years, so he’s used to being shouted at as a form of greeting. And it’s not all that surprising that, when Colin turns around in his seat, he finds Bradley standing in the door, wearing his complete football kit and looking properly exhausted from practice (personally though, Colin prefers to refer to Mr. Bean’s and Mr. Urban’s football training as ‘boot camp’). Oh, also, Bradley looks horrified and is pointing at him.

“You could poke someone’s eye out with that,” Colin says calmly and fully turns around in his office chair.

“Don’t get cheeky with me,” Bradley says in a rather good even if probably unintentional imitation of their house master. “And don’t try to deflect from the treachery that is happening here.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Colin remarks. Bradley scowls at him in response and throws the football he had tucked under his arm at Colin’s head. Colin’s reflexes aren’t that good right before tea time and so his hands don’t really reach his head to protect it and the ball bounces off of it, leaving a muddy smudge on his forehead.

“Ouch,” he complains as he watches the ball bounce on the floor and then roll under Bradley’s bed. “That was uncalled for.”

“Shut up,” Bradley insists and his pointy finger is back to gesture at Colin’s desk. “What do you think you’re doing there?”

Colin doesn’t need to turn around to look to answer that question.

“I am studying, Bradley,” he says slowly. “You know that thing you sometimes attempt to do but that most of the times ends up with you having my rubber up your nose?”

“Exactly,” Bradley says and the tone of voice he uses is the one that only comes out when his favourite football team loses or something equally catastrophic happens. “I turn my back on you for one second and what do you do? Study. Honestly, Colin, other people, normal people, would use the spare time alone to wank to pictures of Sarah Michelle Gellar.” Bradley thinks about that for a moment, obviously gets distracted, and only belatedly adds, “And afterwards they’d share said pictures with their terrific roommate.”

“You’re a very disturbed person,” Colin informs him and tugs the papers he has been working on away from Bradley’s equally curious and muddy hands. “Which is why I don’t discuss my sexual fantasies with you.”

“You just say that because you wank to thoughts of me,” Bradley says and cleans the dirt off his
fingers by rubbing them against Colin’s shirt. When Colin scowls at him for that, he pushes his hands into the pockets of his football shorts and goes on. “Good taste, mate. I’d think of myself as well if I had me as a roommate.”


“That’s a pretty weird simile for your cock, Colin.”

“That would be ‘metaphor’ and it’s not supposed to be one. Bradley.”

Bradley looks at Colin with a troubled frown on his forehead. Colin is alright with that because Bradley (who Colin believes to have had a heart transplant from a my-little-pony pony when he was little) is only able to scowl for five seconds tops at the best of times. Four, three, two, one –

“Whatever,” Bradley shrugs and toes of his football shoes. One of them lands under his desk, the other on a pile of dirty shirts in a corner. “Next time someone asks me why you are so freakishly smart I’ll tell them that it’s because you secretly study.”

Colin blinks at him for a second until he remembers that in Bradley’s world this is actually an insult.

“You should add that I only do it to spite you,” Colin suggests and Bradley looks at him with his patented sadface that not only gets him to kiss questionable women at bars they’re not supposed to be in, but also mostly keeps their teachers from kicking his arse when he’s once again conveniently forgotten to bring his homework.

“As long as I can profit from this illegally acquired knowledge, I reckon I’m okay with it,” Bradley concedes with a sigh and slumps down on his bed. Colin is always amazed at how he does that, the drop down dead thing, without ever hitting his head on the wall or his (unsurprisingly wastelandish) bookshelf. Colin thinks he might have to adapt that technique for his drama class.

Bradley looks up at him questioningly. “Can I put on some music?”

“I’m not listening to Prince again. I can’t even look at raspberries anymore.”

Bradley grins then decides, “Well, in that case I’m going to put on some of that Irish folk music you fancy so much.”

“I don’t –“ Colin starts to protest.

Bradley ignores him and starts to sing “When I came home on a Monday night, as drunk as drunk could be” on top of his lungs.

“You know what it says about you that you know the lyrics to that song, don’t you?” Colin interrupts.

“I am a leprechaun?” Bradley guesses. “Hey, does that mean we’re related now? Colin, in that case I’d have to ask you to stop having sex fantasies about me. This is not Cardiff after all.”

“Cardiffians are incestuous?” Colin asks then he shakes his head. “I don’t want to know. Oh and just so you know: You’re not a leprechaun, you’re a moron.”

There most definitely isn’t a smile tugging at Colin’s lips when he turns back to his books. The silence lasts for about two minutes which is approximately the time that it takes Bradley to stare up
at the premier league poster he has hanging over his bed and try to calculate the odds that his team has of coming out first this season. However, Colin’s pen has barely touched the paper again when Bradley shifts on his creaking bed.

“Tell me, Colin, what are you working on?”

“Philosophy.”

“Ah, the art of Mr. Bloom talking rubbish and everyone buying it just because he’s fit.”

“Bradley,” Colin says without looking up from his book, “are you jealous of Mr. Bloom?”

“Nope,” Bradley answers merrily. “I can graciously admire someone else’s good looks. I’m that secure in my strappingness.”

“Sure,” Colin says, humouring him because for one brief idiotic second he thinks that agreeing to Bradley’s endless self praise might shut him up and give Colin the opportunity to return to his work.

“What about philosophy?” Bradley asks, rather unsurprisingly. “Do we have homework? Homework I don’t even know about?”

“No,” Colin replies absentmindedly while leafing through a book. “Just, Mr. Bloom talked about Schopenhauer and nihilism and I was just wondering – so I picked up some books from the library and –”

“Wait a moment,” Bradley says and sounds so shocked that Colin glances over to him. The other boy is propped up on his elbows, hair even messier than usual and a look of disbelief on his face. “You mean you’re doing this voluntarily? Colin, I’m sorry but I don’t think I can be your friend any longer.”

“Bummer,” Colin says, “first I’m not allowed to fancy you, now I can’t even be your mate. My existence is pointless.”

Bradley looks at him funnily for a second, then he laughs and nods. Then however, the grin disappears from his face as suddenly as it has appeared and with a great sigh Bradley drops his head back onto his pillow. “We have that in common then.”

Colin glances back at the messy array of books on his desk. Then he decides that Schopenhauer must’ve been an idiot anyway, at least if Colin understood that bit about nihilism and not caring about anything correctly. Clearly, Schopenhauer’s poodle didn’t have the same affect on the philosopher that Bradley has on him.

“Why is your existence pointless?” Colin asks and stretches out his legs.

“You know the only reason why I haven’t fallen into a coma during philosophy?” Bradley asks and even though Colin knows and this would’ve worked as a rhetorical question just as nicely, Bradley explains anyway, “Because Angel is sitting right next to me. And you know what she does the entire, I kid you not, the entire period? She sits there and thinks about marrying Mr. Bloom.”

“At least you have that in common,” Colin says dryly.

Bradley thinks about it for a moment, then his lips curl faintly and he glances at Colin. “That’d be some wedding. Mr. Urban would be my best man and as a maid of honour we’d have Mr. Mortensen.”
“He would look extremely classy in a dress.”

“He’d have Mr. Bana picking it out for him and it’d be pink and possibly frilly.”

“Although, I have to say,” Colin says, more serious now, “I’m a bit disappointed that I don’t get to be the best man in your big queer marriage.”

“I would have you in an instant,” Bradley says with the sincerity that made Mr. Depp give him the role of Romeo in their play last year, “if you weren’t so disapproving of my choice of fiancé in the first place!”

Colin gets up to put away his books and agrees, “Yes, I’m a horrible person for not believing in your everlasting love for a philosophy teacher who also happens to be a 32 year old bloke.”

Bradley makes a dismissive gesture, not in the least put off. “I’m an open minded metrosexual young man, I don’t care about that.”

“That’s probably because you don’t know what ‘metrosexual’ means,” Colin answers and only barely manages to stuff the last book onto his already overflowing shelf.

“It means that I like doing it on trains,” Bradley says, completely serious. Then his eyebrows bunch together and he adds with even more seriousness, “But most of all, I’d like Angel to be my girlfriend.”

“Yes,” Colin agrees, “look up ‘metrosexual’ in the dictionary and you’ll find a picture of you holding Angel’s hand in a railway compartment.”

He looks down at Bradley who is staring up at the ceiling, sweaty hair clinging to his forehead, and then he shakes his head and slumps down on the floor next to his roommate’s bed. He winces a little because his right buttock landed on Bradley’s DS that is now digging into his bum and when he attempts to pull it out from under him, he accidentally grabs a greasy chips wrapping from under the bed.

“We really need to clean up this room some time,” he says, knowing that it’ll never happen. Or at least not until right before the summer holidays or until Mr. Bloom gets Mr. Bean to bellow at them for an hour or so.

“Yeah,” Bradley sighs and Colin can smell his sweaty feet from where he is sitting.

They are quiet for a moment. No matter how much he complains to Bradley about his obnoxious habit of being so LOUD about everything all the time? Colin thinks he prefers Bradley hollering lines from stupid songs into his ear to this unnatural silence.

Not that Bradley can’t be quiet, but that’s normally when he is asleep or when he is pretending to be when really he is wanking in the bed next to Colin’s (easy to tell the difference because shallow sleepy breathing and suppressed moans really don’t sound similar). Other than that? Bradley is always going on about something and while sometimes it’s fiercely annoying, most of the times Colin just enjoys talkative, happy Bradley.

“Right,” he says after another stretch of silence. “Explain to me again why you don’t just ask her out.”

“Because,” Bradley says gravely, “our families are sworn enemies, we’re from entirely different circles, it would end it bloodshed, it can never be.”
“That is not an explanation,” Colin points out and unsuccessfully tries to rub an ink stain out of their carpet. “That is a rather mangled summary of ‘Romeo and Juliet’.”

Bradley chooses to just growl at Colin in response.

Colin shakes his head and decides to simply pull a dirty pair of trousers over the ink stain to hide it. “You should simply ask her out.”

Bradley turns his head to look at him. “I should simply fart in your face.”

“Good point,” Colin replies. “Clearly, you win this argument thanks to your amazing rhetorical skills and let’s not forget your stunning ability to stay on topic.”

Bradley doesn’t punch him or even just insult him. He’s just quiet, so Colin turns to check whether he is still alive. He is and he’s staring up again as if he was gazing into a terrific night sky with thousands of stars that promise you all the answers in the universe and not just at their ceiling with tiny black smudges from squashed gnats.

“You know why I don’t simply ask her out?” Bradley asks him then, twisting so he can face Colin. His voice is quiet and kind and he suddenly sounds grown up which is a little frightening. “It’s for the same reason you don’t ‘simply’ tell your parents that they can forget all their great plans for your career as a doctor because all you wanna do is acting.”

Anger rises up inside Colin and he wants to punch Bradley and tell him that this is bloody well not the same fucking thing. But Bradley simply keeps looking at him with that almost deferential understanding in his eyes that Colin feels like a complete idiot a second later.

“I reckon,” he says then, a sigh on his lips, “that means we both have to go on living our backup lives.”

Bradley grins at him and nods. “Meaning you’re back to secretly lusting after me.”

“And once again you will have to pretend to be the shallow class clown who – no wait, that’s your real identity!”

Colin is prepared for Bradley’s attack, grips the arm that came to swat him and pulls hard. With a surprised whoop Bradley falls to the floor and pulls Colin down with him. They roll around amidst the dirty clothes, magazines and empty biscuit wrappings, both laughing too much to be of any real use in this fight. They end up sprawled across the floor, Colin’s head pillowed on his rucksack and Bradley’s on Colin’s stomach.

“You’re the boniest pillow of all times,” Bradley complains, shifting his head about.

“That’s because you always eat my food,” Colin answers and nudges Bradley’s head so it doesn’t rest directly on his hipbone.

Colin knows that Bradley feels comfortable now because he has this stupid smile on his face. His head is quite heavy for all the diet-thoughts (as Bradley calls them and manages to make that sound like a good thing) in them. The weight reminds Colin that his stomach is empty. He thinks of the breathing technique that Mr. Depp has taught him and watches Bradley’s head rise and fall a little with each intake of breath.

After a moment he says quietly, “Mr. Bloom said that it would be sensible to come up with a second career choice besides acting.”

Bradley turns his head, angle odd, expression suddenly irritated nonetheless. “Well, he’s a
“teacher, what do you think?” When he shrugs his shoulder bumps against Colin’s side. “He probably wants to recruit you for teacherhood. I heard they do that, sort of like Scientology, only less with the white pointy hoods.”

“I think you mean the Ku Klux Klan,” Colin says but he is smiling again.

“Besides,” Bradley continues, ignoring him, “you can’t change your career plans this late. I already set up a fan website for you.”

“You don’t know any html,” Colin reminds him. “You think the internet is for porn.”

“Which it is. And for fansites,” Bradley explains reasonably and shifts so he can prop his dirty feet up on Colin’s bed. “So, thatirishbloke.co.uk is up and running and I will start uploading pictures soon. I only need to get you terrifically sloshed and have someone do nude shots of you while you’re asleep.”

“Please pick Katie for that then at least I won’t look like a page three girl.”

“I don’t see how that would be helpful,” Bradley says. “You’d be a fantastic page three girl, what you lack in bosom, you make up in cheekbones. – Can I be your manager and the president of your fanclub at the same time though? It worries me.”

“I am going to be a theatre actor. There will be no need for a fanclub.”

“There always is, Colin, there always is.”

Colin shifts a little and notices that he lies half on top a not-yet-completely-empty hobnob box. He pulls it out from under his shoulder and finds two biscuits still inside. He hands one to Bradley, who started making needy sounds as soon as the wrapping rustled.

While Bradley fits the entire biscuit into his mouth, Colin opts for making his last. He takes a small bite from it and then says, “I just remembered that we planned all this already.”

“Maybe you did,” Bradley says, rather unintelligible around biscuit, “in your secret diary.”

“No really,” Colin insists. “Last time we were in the village, in the pub, remember? You already made me the president of your fanclub.”

“I don’t know what I thought,” Bradley says. “You don’t know anything about football.”

Colin swats him for that as he always does at this point. “You’ll obviously play in the Irish League, if you are any good.”

“I’m brilliant,” Bradley says, unsurprisingly. “And fine, you can be president. As long as you leave the merchandise stuff to someone else. I don’t want t-shirts with my face and some philosophy quote showing up.”

“I’m okay with that.”

“And I can still be running your fanclub, too.”

“It’d be more helpful if you brought your entire team to watch my plays,” Colin muses. “I want to play to a full house.”

“A full house of footballers? Yeah, cheers, mate,” Bradley laughs and makes a blind grabby hand in order to get more biscuits. He frowns heavily when Colin places the empty box into his hand.
and Colin sighs and gives him half of his own biscuit.

“Anyway,” Bradley looks up at him once more and his voice has changed a little, is quieter again. “I know you like Mr. Bloom and all, but really? If he doesn’t believe in you, then he’s a prat.”

Colin knows perfectly well that this is slightly simplified but that still doesn’t keep him from feeling oddly relieved.

“I thought you wanted to gay marry him?” he asks with mock surprise.

“Not anymore. You ruined it now.”

“Yeah, sorry.”

He reaches out to pat Bradley’s head, a gesture that earns him a slap. His hand still sneaks into Bradley’s hair and locks down, tugging lightly. Bradley twists but can’t really get away, so he settles for prying the fingers loose one by one. He fishes for a tie, in school colours and part of the uniform (which didn’t save it from ending up on the floor), and wraps it around Colin’s hand. When that looks like someone really drunk has mummified it, Bradley finally seems happy and holds on to the tiny rest of the tie that is still sticking out.

“I’m now the puppet master of your hand,” he announces and tugs at his makeshift leash, so Colin’s hand dangles in the air. “Harhar.”

After a moment Colin says thoughtfully, “I think I’m gonna be the Cyrano to your Christian.”

“And the most amazing thing?” Bradley says, once again raising Colin’s mummified hand and speaking to it while it dangles uselessly in front of his face. “Is that you actually believe that I know what you’re talking about. Colin. Is that fancy talk for you wanting to be the bent cowboy to my other bent cowboy?”

“No, Bradley,” Colin says and lets his mummy hand cover Bradley’s face. “It means that I’ll help you to woo Angel, you imbecile.”

“Oh, good. Actually, brilliant,” Bradley says, slightly mumbled because of the tie and hand before he manages to remove both. “That’s the best idea you had since… since this morning when you let me have the rest of your muffin.”

“I didn’t so much let you have it as you stole it out of my hand and stuffed it into your giant mouth while you made obscene noises.” Colin imitates the groaning and feels Bradley laughing again.

“Speaking of,” Bradley says and sits up abruptly. “Isn’t it tea time already?”

Colin regards his roommate and scrunches up his nose. “You should shower first, you smell like –“

“An entire football team?” Bradley provides helpfully, looks at his watch and becomes twitchy.

“Like you had sex with an entire football team,” Colin specifies.

“It’s sexy manly football sweat, you’re just jealous and shut up.” Bradley tries to sniff his own armpits and then gets to his feet and starts pulling of his stockings. “Mr. Urban said I was exceptional today.”

“Though his exact words were ‘a little less rubbish than the pathetic rest of you lot’, ” Colin says and frowns at the look suddenly appearing on Bradley’s face as he looms over him. “If you throw
that sock in my face I swear I will let spiders crawl into your mouth while you sleep.”

Bradley’s hand stops mid air as he considers it and Colin swats the stocking away before he sits up himself. While he unsuccessfully tries to untangle the knots of the tie around his hand, Bradley pushes down his football shorts and carelessly steps out of them, picks up a pair of remotely clean jeans from the floor and pulls them on.

“First point on the ‘Wooing Angel’ agenda,” Colin says as he gets to his feet. “Work on your personal hygiene.”

Bradley slips into Colin’s flipflops and is already half way out the door when he replies, “Next thing you tell me is that my burping skills aren’t helping. I’m not sure I like you, Colin Morgan.”

“Well,” Colin replies as he switches the light out with his still mummified hand and closes the door behind them, “I can’t stand you either, so I reckon we’re covered.”

Bradley laughs and throws an arm around Colin’s shoulder, pulling him close and dragging him along. Unsurprisingly he smells of sweat and half dried mud and Colin figures that he’ll have transferred most of that glorious manly stench onto him once they’ve reached the dining room. Colin is going to eat Bradley’s cake for that.
The axiom of choice

Chapter Summary

Viggo has a bit of a crisis, Eric helps with maths (April 2010)

There are worse ways to spend one’s Friday night, even though grading papers isn’t that high on Eric’s list of preferred activities. But he is also a man of principles (at least sometimes) and he plans to enjoy tomorrow’s endless sports marathon on TV. So he needs to get these done. Besides, he is making good progress.

He is already wearing his pajama bottoms because they are by far the most comfortable thing he owns, and he is drinking beer and eating chipsticks with his left hand while his right holds the pen. But the sloppiness of this is counterbalanced by the neat stacks of papers on his perfectly organized desk and the quiet classical music coming from his stereo, so it’s alright in terms of yin and yang, if he got that right from Vig’s explanation.

The doorbell rings and while he is a bit surprised by that – he has announced his self proclaimed exile loud enough this morning – he is also more than happy about the distraction.

When he opens the door, the bottle of beer in his hand Viggo glowers at him. And while he has recently managed to cut his hair to a more presentable length and shaved off his beard, that glower alone still makes him seem like your regular tramp slash psycho.

“Are you busy?” he asks instead of a ‘hello’ and manages to look so sullen that Eric feels both amusement and concern rising up inside of him.

“Not really,” he replies and pushes the door to his flat wide open in silent invitation.

It’s not uncommon for Viggo to show up on his doorstep unannounced, especially on a Friday night. Eric supposes it’s more than enough courtesy that Viggo rings the doorbell and doesn’t simply use his key to let himself in whenever he pleases. Come to think about it, he does that when he arrives before Eric is in and it has happened more than once that Eric came home to find his bed already occupied (because Viggo claims that his couch is a work of the devil).

Right now, it doesn’t seem like Viggo is planning to go to sleep anytime soon, couch or bed. Eric watches him pick up random things only to put them back down again without really looking at them, clearly restless.

“Okay, what’s up?” he asks eventually, sipping from his beer. “Do you need me to kill someone for you?”

“Yes. Please.” Viggo replies instantly and actually manages to not let any sign of irony show in his voice.

Eric chuckles quietly. “Want me to kiss it better, too?”

Surprisingly enough and contrary to most other times, this doesn’t make Viggo laugh. There’s just the faintest of smiles on his lips. Eric folds up the test papers to put them back onto the stack and puts the cap back onto his pen so the ink doesn’t dry out. Viggo has picked up Eric’s open bottle
of beer and regards his desk critically.

“I did disturb you,” he states.

“If you want to call your spontaneous one man hate parade a disturbance,” Eric answers as he switches out the desk lamp.

“I don’t get how you can grade papers in the middle of the night anyway,” Viggo grumbles, everything cause for annoyance in his momentary frame of mind.

“I think you’re glad I do.” Eric raises his voice only a little when he leaves the living room on the quest for a replacement for his beverage. “Otherwise you’d have only found me snoring in bed and I’m a really sound sleeper. – Do you want a fresh one?”

He has brought two with him but Viggo raises the bottle in his hand and shakes his head. Shrugging, Eric puts the spare one on the coffee table and sits down on the sofa, leans back against the cushions. His fingers pick at the damp label of the bottle as he watches his friend resume his pacing.

“Seriously, Vig,” Eric says after a few minutes, “if you don’t sit your ass down, I’ll start to get twitchy.”

Viggo’s eyes refocus to stare with mocking incredulity at Eric, so he shakes his arms and his head like he was suffering from Parkinson in the final stage. In response, Vig rolls his eyes but plops down on the comfy chair next to the sofa.

“Are you happy now?”

Eric shrugs. “It’s a start.”

He knows Viggo wants to talk, has known since the second the other man stood on his doorstep. This is not like one of the nights when Viggo’s undefined melancholy sets in and prompting him to talk about it would be like pricking a bear with a temper with a red hot poker.

It takes him a few minutes. By then Eric has put his feet up on the coffee table and noticed that his left sock is threatening to grow a hole right above his big toe.

“I don’t know why I let his words bother me that much in the first place,” Viggo says quietly and rolls the beer bottle between his palms.

It’s not difficult to figure out who he is talking about. There are few persons Eric knows that are as talented at raising other people’s hackles as Orlando Bloom.

“Orlando’s a smart kid.”

“He’s not actually a kid anymore, you do realize that?”

Yeah, Eric knows that but that doesn’t make it better. He takes care that his voice doesn’t show too much of his disapproval of Orlando’s radicalism.

“I think I’m rather glad that his understanding of math never got past third year. Once he’s set his eyes on a target he pursues it like a blood hound.”

The almost desperate agreement flashing over Viggo’s features now only confirms Eric’s silent assessment but he keeps his tongue in check. Instead it’s Viggo who finally finds a starting point.
“I didn’t find the exit of the pub fast enough when he started talking Nietzsche.”

“Orlando has joined forces with the greatest nihilist of all? Jesus Christ.”

“They leave nothing but destruction in their wake,” Viggo says and laughs dryly, shaking his head over himself.

“So?”

“So, what do you think?” The hand gesture accompanying the question carries as much frustration as resignation. “Orlando throws down the gauntlet and of course I am stupid enough to pick it up and find myself defending everything I believe in.” He adds, quieter and maybe not even directed at Eric, “Worse, I even defend the parts I don’t believe in, or am not even certain about.”

Eric doesn’t answer.

“Thing is,” Viggo continues after the silence has stretched. “I don’t even know if he isn’t right. The more I defend what I think right, the deeper he digs and questions everything. I catch myself delivering weaker and weaker arguments which of course he tears to shred in no time. And as a matter of fact, then the questions practically ask themselves and won’t stop.”

“Which ones?”

So Viggo recites them all. How do you know that God exists, why does he allow -, how can you base your life on some book written eons ago, what is the fucking meaning of -, and you really believe that?

Eric doesn’t say anything, isn’t sure whether at this stage Viggo would even hear him. Vig has rested his elbows on his knees and his voice is a steady raspy ramble, not all of it making sense to Eric or, he guesses, to himself either. The CD with classical music eventually ends, pronouncing the silence.

Then Vig inevitably starts addressing one issue, finds ten more waiting for him around the corner, takes them seriously like he always does, only to end up with ten times as many open ended questions. And sometimes, right in the middle of a sentence, he buries his face in his hands for a moment, tries to regain some focus.

His shoulders are slumped, weight of the world resting on them and making him look almost fragile; something so unlike him. Eric is torn between wanting to shake some sense into him or put an arm around his shoulders to share the burden. But he knows both options are bullshit; this isn’t about pity and getting it over with, nor is it about compassion.

Eventually, Viggo shakes his head again after having fallen silent. When he looks up, what he says now is directed at Eric. Quietly he asks, “So, what does it say about my faith that it takes so little to – What does that say about me?”

Eric puts his empty bottle down on the table, folds his hands and mirrors Viggo’s posture, elbows on his knees and knuckles cracking when he grips his own fingers a bit too tight. He doesn’t have answers, none that Viggo’s sharp mind couldn’t deconstruct within a heartbeat. It’s the self loathing in Viggo’s unsteady look that Eric wants to stare down when they lock eyes.

Viggo doesn’t avert his gaze, despite the uneasy flickering in his eyes, and there is so much stubbornness in that look, so much determination just twisted at the moment. Eric silently shakes his head and arches his brows but doesn’t back down. Viggo eventually breaks their eyelock by rubbing his hand over his face.
“Christ, I need a cigarette,” he murmurs.

“The balcony is all yours.” Eric smiles when Viggo scoffs in mild indignation. “No smoking in here, you know my landlord.”

“Pussy.”

Viggo gets up from his chair, patting his back pocket in search for his pack of cigarettes. Eric grabs his striped bathrobe from its hook on the way out. It earns him an arched eyebrow when he steps out of the kitchen onto the balcony.

“You look like you just escaped from a mental facility,” Viggo says, looking him up and down, cigarette already between his lips.

“I don’t care.” Eric wraps the robe around himself. “It’s still cold enough, I think I can do without freezing my arse off.”

“Pussy,” Viggo repeats, corner of his mouth twitching as he inhales the first drag. He keeps the smoke inside for a bit before exhaling slowly and deliberately. He is calmer now, partly due to the nicotine, partly because he’s blown off the worst of the steam, but Eric knows that he is still waiting for a response.

Eric buries his hands in the pockets of his robe and leans against the wall next to the balcony door. Against the black sky only a few stars are visible and like every time when he looks up, he thinks that he wouldn’t have minded studying astronomy either.

Not that he is unhappy with what he chose or where he is now. He might complain about the weather but England is alright, this place feels like home by now. He’s got a job that he is good at and that even is fun most of the times. Over all he has got great fellows as colleagues, quite a few of them he considers mates. And he’s got Viggo.

And despite some of his pupils’ stupidity and despite the crude jokes about the improper relationship he supposedly has with his calculator, he still hasn’t lost his passion for mathematics and everything related to it. When Sean talks about ancient Egyptian culture, Eric thinks of polyhedrons and geometry; Bernie might start reciting Shakespeare at the sight of a flower, Eric sees the golden ratio in the shape of the petals.

He could deal with having to get a new job, live on a different continent, get acquainted with new colleagues. None of that would essentially change anything, would it? But if he’d start questioning how he perceived the world, if he lost his faith in mathematic – who would he be?

“I didn’t know that brooding was infectious.”

Eric turns his head to face Viggo again who, leaning against the steel banister of the balcony, looks at him with tired amusement.

“I’m not brooding.”

“What are you thinking about then? Please say it’s dirty jokes and morally questionable anecdotes.”

Viggo’s tone of voice is light but he still looks at Eric half way expectantly and making jokes is indeed Eric’s autopilot response to anything that is too serious for too long. He’s never thought of it as gamesmanship and Viggo’s look now tells him it’s not been perceived as such. More as equilibrium maybe. But it’s still not what Eric wants now.
“You know what the AC is? The axiom of choice?” he asks instead.

Viggo quirks an eyebrow and shrugs. “Something mathematical, I’m guessing.”

“Right on. It’s one of those axioms that a good deal of analysis is based on, needs to take as a given to proceed. The axiom of choice basically states that for any set $X$ of nonempty sets, there exists a choice function $f$ defined on $x$, right?”

Viggo stubs out the cigarette in the single flower box and crosses his arms in front of his chest.

“If you say so.”

Eric pulls his hands out of his bathrobe’s pockets and scratches his head, trying to think of an easier, well a non-mathematical explanation.

“Think of it as a row of pairs of shoes.” He gestures at Viggo’s trainers. “One nonempty set would be one pair, like your sneakers, right? You can have any number of pairs of shoes, and you line them all up.” Again he gestures at Viggo’s feet, indicating that the entity of Viggo’s footwear could neatly be lined up along the banister. “Now you could write a function that allows you to pick out only the left shoe out of each set, a choice function $f$ defined on $x$.”

This time there is understanding on Viggo’s features, even if he doesn’t seem to see where Eric is going with this. But despite that he nods.

“Okay, got it.”

“Yeah, but the difficulty appears when there is no natural choice of elements from each set, like in the left shoe of each pair of trainers.” Searching for another example, Eric looks down at his own feet. “Exchange the shoes for socks for example, you don’t have a right and left choice there, right? And if you put your socks all in piles you can’t even say you want the 10th sock because where would you start counting?”

He pauses, partly because rhetorically it makes sense, partly so Viggo can keep up. Vig looks at him with curiosity.

“Still, the axiom of choice states that you can always have a function $f$ that makes it possible for you to pick out one specific sock out of your pile, or piles.”

Viggo arches his eyebrows, glances down at Eric’s sock clad feet.

“The one with the hole in it?” he asks with amusement.

Eric grins and wriggles his semi-naked big toe but shakes his head.

“No, any sock but they are all, well, just socks.”

“Dirty or washed?” Viggo wants to know and aside from the teasing there is real interest in his voice as he tries to suss it out.

“Just socks.”

Viggo frowns, thinks about it for a moment, checking whether there are any loopholes.

“So, that function just selects randomly?”

“But how is it supposed to do that? It’s not like it can cover its eyes and pick without looking. It’s a function.”
Viggo throws his hands up in mock surrender.

“Alright, genius. How is it supposed to work? It’s impossible.”

Eric notes Viggo’s displeased frown, admitting defeat hardly ever feels great. Still he shrugs and says, “But the greater majority of mathematicians believe it *is* possible and base other theories on that assumption.”

Viggo looks at him as if he wants to say that there is a reason why all mathematicians would be in a loony bin if he had a say in it.

“Well, what do *you* think?” he asks eventually because that’s what actually matters to him.

Eric raises his hands as well and shakes his head. “I think it’s a pile of socks and it is fucking impossible to pick one.”

“So, you’re like the Luther of mathematic.” Viggo shakes his head, still not sure what this is about but apparently amused by the mental gymnastics.

Eric laughs at the comparison and stuffs his hands back into the relatively warm bathrobe pockets but shakes his head.

“I hope not, I’d be some fat xenophobic monk and who’d want that.”

“You’d also be German and might have a better tolerance for colder temperatures.”

“You’re not the one standing out here practically in his underwear.”

“And holey socks.” Viggo stuffs his cigarettes back into his backpocket and pulls the balcony door open. “Want me to make you a hot cocoa to warm you up, my precious princess?”

“I think I’ll skin you and wear your meatsuit as a coat.” Eric re-enters the kitchen and instantly feels warmer. “I might also piss on your corpse but that’s mostly because I need to pee.”

Behind him Viggo laughs.

“You’d indeed make a fine religious leader.”

“Hey, that was your comparison. I just think that constructive analysis is more plausible in its argumentation against the AC.”

“But the schism remains.”

“Yeah, and I mean it’s *math*, it should all be logical and stringent, right?” Eric leans back against the counter and rubs his hands together in order to warm them up. “I don’t mean to be disrespectful, you know that, but I think religion has made it awfully easy for itself, what with the whole axiom of absolute faith. They just tell you that you’re supposed to believe and full stop.”

Viggo shakes his head and pulls out a chair to sit down.

“It’s not necessary to prove that God exists to –“

“Exactly!” Eric interrupts him. “That should make it all fuck easy, shouldn’t it? I mean I should be the one shaken by something like the AC, that makes me question the logical structure of my entire world view, and what is math without its logic?”
Viggo gives him a long look. He has connected the dots that lead Eric from Viggo’s own unanswered questions to the axiom of choice but in the silence of the kitchen he is re-evaluating the connections and the quantifier that Eric has used to come to his conclusion. Still, eventually Viggo sighs and shakes his head.

“If this is supposed to make me feel better, I’m not sure you’re going about it the right way. I fail at something that is fuck easy in comparison to math?”

“No, no. I meant that it’s awfully easy for a religion, for a church to say that you ‘just have to believe’. I didn’t say that it was easy for the intelligent individual; quite the contrary.”

It’s an important distinction and it’s at the heart of the dilemma or at least how Eric sees it. Human intelligence is the one thing that always threatens to break your neck; it laughs in your face when you search for something more, something beyond the grasp of ratio. It leaves you with the choice between being a naïve idiot or a bitter blasphemer. And still it’s so inherent in human nature to be curious and to question things that sometimes this skepticism is the crucial step towards really appreciating what you got.

“You’d be completely daft not to question things, it’s called being human, right?” Eric waits until Viggo nods reluctantly before he announces, “And now a commercial break; I need to take a leak.”

He walks past Viggo, squeezing his shoulder lightly on the way. The other man is quiet, the look on his face undecided between brooding and simple contemplation and he doesn’t react to Eric’s announcement or the touch. Eric still leaves the bathroom door open. While he relieves himself he finishes the last track of thought, knowing that he only has to raise his voice a little to be understood in the kitchen.

“Me, I just have to battle with the little inconsistencies in my field which is otherwise defined by logic – and really, maybe that’s just because I’m too stupid to wrap my head around the logic of the AC.” He readjusts his pajama bottoms, and before he flushes, he adds, “Easy as pie in comparison.”

He washes his hands and as per usual can’t help but regard himself critically in the mirror while he does so. The bloke that gazes back at him looks comfortingly familiar and what if there is something missing, if there’s the faintest sign of living a life on hold? Well, neon light is kind to no one, especially not in the middle of the night, and besides, he thinks he needs a shave. He rinses the soap off his hands while he waits for Viggo’s response. When it comes, his voice is a little louder and probably not coming from the kitchen.

“I’m not hoping for proof that some white bearded guy on a cloud exists who relieves me of the pesky duty of making my own decisions,” Viggo says.

Eric glances away from his own image in the mirror and finds the other man standing in front of the large Escher print on the living room wall.

“It’s not about that,” Viggo says. “But if I question the existence of God how am I to define what’s right and what’s wrong?”

“If you could define it, chisel it in stone thanks to a direct line to God, how long would it take until that’d turn into dogmatism?”

“So the alternative is some shaky self conscious gut feeling?” Viggo turns around and regards him with arched eyebrows, arms crossed in front of his chest. But after a moment he nods slowly. “Well, I suppose you’re right. Probably that is at least better than blinkered dogmatism.”
“I think I prefer having a rough time with the axiom of choice to never questioning anything and maybe not even realizing how blind I actually am.”

It’s true and maybe it is the truest thing that Eric has said all evening. And he knows that they both have a lot of faults and habits they wouldn’t mind getting rid of. And there still is this feeling of nagging emptiness sometimes, the emotional equivalent to how you feel right before breakfast so to speak. But they are honest with themselves, even if that means having to acknowledge their own limited horizons.

Viggo is quiet and the look he gives Eric could be described as scrutinizing if Eric didn’t know better. He just pushes his hands back into the pockets of his bathrobe and waits him out. Eventually, Viggo scratches his nose and behind his hand he is hiding a smile. It’s audible in his voice anyway when he continues talking.

“You think it’s the same for Orlando? I mean, being an atheist must suck just as much. You always have to reaffirm your non-belief with proof that God doesn’t, that he can’t exist.”

“So, what he does is just twisting it so that your failure to prove his existence turns into his victory?” Eric chuckles and nods, supporting Viggo’s tentative way of coming to terms with this uncertainty once more. “I think you’re onto something there.”

“I’d still find it horrendously satisfying to publically crucify him,” Viggo says and Eric is glad to hear that the humor by far outweighs the bitterness by now.

“Sure,” he agrees with a dry tone of voice. “It’s a minor setback that you’re the most pacifistic and philanthropic person I know –“

He waits for the interruption that he knows is going to come. Trust Viggo to never be able to just take a compliment silently, no matter how true it is.

“I can work around that.”

“You’d also never be able to cobble together a cross that would withstand Orlando’s kicking and screaming.”

“Oh, ye of little faith,” Viggo complains and steps closer to lightly kick Eric’s sock clad foot.

Eric instantly pulls his defenseless foot out of harm’s way and raises his hands in surrender. “I just doubt your carpenter skills, nothing else believe me,” he laughs.

“Yeah,” Viggo chuckles, not stepping back. Instead, he stares at Eric and for a second it feels like he has to be extremely shortsighted all of a sudden, until Eric realizes that it’s not his face Viggo is looking at but the side of his head.

“Before tonight I just put it down to unfortunate genetic predisposition,” Viggo says, completely serious, and takes another step closer, squinting his eyes. “But did you know that according to Buddhist belief Buddha’s big ears are a sign of great spiritual wisdom?”

Even before he knows he’s doing it, Eric has raised his hand to his right ear and feels for his ear lobe. Unsurprisingly, it’s still shaped exactly the way it always has been.

“Did you just insult me.” He laughs when in response Viggo bats his hand away to replace it with his own. “Or was that your way of saying 'thank you, Eric'?”

Viggo tries to stay serious but fails miserably, his toothy grin getting the better of him as he tugs at Eric’s (perfectly normal sized) ear.
“I’d never,” he says, quiet mockery in his voice. Eric feels his ear growing hot under the touch, but holds still when Viggo raises his other hand to mirror the first’s actions and his smile grows broader. When he grins his cheeks touch the inside of Viggo’s palms who curls his fingertips against the backs of Eric’s ears.

“If you call them wing nut ears again I’ll hit you.”

“Seriously,” Viggo says quietly, all the world’s sincerity in that one word. Eric feels something like relief easing over his worries when in his friend’s gaze there is nothing but calm concentration. Viggo smiles and murmurs, “Thanks, Eric,” before he kisses him.

This is not the first time this has ever happened.

Viggo’s lips are dry and his kiss is firm, an affirmation, a seal more than anything else at first. His hands still frame Eric’s face, but there is no need to hold him still because Eric isn’t going anywhere. His hands find Viggo’s hips and he kisses back without thinking twice about it, tilts his head just the littlest bit for the angle to match, knows the same firmness and sureness to be in his response.

When they break apart eventually the kiss’s slowness stretches out into the aftermath. Eric brings their foreheads together and closes his eyes. Takes the first, slightly shaky, breath and hears (feels) Viggo doing the same. It’s now that he realizes –

This doesn’t seem like all the times before.

He knows it with as much certainty as he knows his own name, and this realization rushes through him with a sudden force that is almost sickening, definitely dizzying. His hand grasps Viggo’s hips harder and he holds on, both to steady himself and because suddenly he can’t even begin to contemplate the possibility of Viggo not being right there. This (and he can’t even find a word for it yet) should definitely be the most frightening thing in the world. A paradigm change so immense that it should push Vig right into his next heretic crisis, that it should make Eric question the correctness even of ‘one plus one equals two’.

He knows he’s still breathing too hard, has to consciously tell the muscles in his hands to stop gripping Viggo’s hips with such desperate force. But he still pulls back a little more to look at his best friend for years.

Viggo’s eyes are grayish blue and it’s nothing new to Eric, he’s seen them up close countless times. Viggo looks at him steady and sure, just this side of defiantly stubborn and barely hiding the wickedness. So very very much like him and like always.

Eric’s responding grin is immediate, even before he realizes it. He not only gets the feeling, he shares it.

“Well, you’re welcome.”

His grin grows a little too big for his face.

“Yeah, thought I was,” Viggo replies and finally lets him go, pats his right cheek lightly before he drops his hands onto Eric’s shoulders and obviously is infected by Eric’s stupid happy go lucky smile.

It’s that responding grin that in turn and as always Eric finds impossible to resist. Viggo inhales in surprise when Eric pulls him closer again for another kiss but he responds with the same implicitness that has always defined their friendship. The pressure of his lips hold the same self
assurance that usually shapes his words, the slow twist of his tongue conveys the same tentative gentleness that he only ever lets Eric witness. Right; this is how it feels, how Eric feels. Right.

Eventually, Viggo laughs into his mouth and as if the kiss weren’t messy enough already, he licks over Eric’s mouth and above his cupid’s bow, spreading enough saliva to be almost dripping.

“Great, now I need to shave,” Eric murmurs and feels Viggo’s smile against his mouth. “I got your slobber all over my beard.”

“Pussy,” Viggo mocks for the third time that evening.

“No, that tastes different.”

Viggo pulls back enough to give Eric one of his completely unconvincing shocked looks and while Eric wipes his mouth with the back of his hand Viggo says, “Hey, you didn’t just compare kissing me to going down on a woman.”

Eric presses his fingers against the back of Viggo’s skull and lightly knocks their heads together. “If we’re being really specific here you started it.”

Viggo snorts, “Fair enough.”

“If you really wanna know you taste more of beer, ashtray and –“ Eric smacks his lips together as if re-living the taste. “Right, chicken wings. When did you have chicken wings? I am starving.”

“Now that’s news,” Viggo replies dryly. He wraps his fingers around Eric’s wrists and pries his hands loose.

All evening Eric has held back the emotional bullshit but right now he can’t, has to make sure and selfishly wants his own bit of reassurance.

“You’re alright, though?”

Maybe his need to ask is prompted by what just happened, Eric isn’t sure. Mostly it’s about something more important, something vital for his friend and therefore for him.

Viggo’s grin melts into something smoother and for once he doesn’t make a joke out of it like he normally would. He frowns a little as he thinks about it and is obviously still a bit reluctant to say yes. But there is none of that jittery unease in his eyes any longer, so Eric knows the answer even before Viggo nods, once and firm, in response.

That’s really all he needed and he squeezes Viggo’s hand before he attempts to let go of it. Viggo holds on though and searches his eyes now, a similar curiosity and just the faintest hint of diffidence there, too.

“I love you,” he says.

Eric doesn’t have to think about that. He nods, once and firm.

“Yeah, I know.”

Then he leans in and licks right across Viggo’s mouth, leaving a trail of his own spit both as affirmation and belated payback. Viggo barks out a laugh and uses the collar of Eric’s bathrobe to wipe away the wetness.

Faintly, from the pocket of his jeans, his mobile starts ringing. Eric ignores the abuse of his
evening wear and tries to suss out the song (of course Viggo has personalized ringtones for everyone he knows, what else is a mobile phone for if not that?). It takes him a moment, but then he remembers; it’s the guitar riff from INXS’s ‘Devil inside’. He straightens his bathrobe and arches an eyebrow in question.

“New ringtone for Orlando? Mature.”

Viggo grins but instead of reaching into his pocket he lets his phone ring and heads for the kitchen.

“How do you feel about some late night feasting?”

Eric watches him open the door to his freezer and almost disappear inside of it. The phone keeps ringing while Viggo rummages through the frozen food.

“You’re not gonna answer that?”

Viggo reappears, holding a large package of Eric’s favorite Chinese instant meal, and says, “That little asshole’s confession and absolution can wait till tomorrow.”

“Orlando in a confessional?” Eric laughs and fetches them fresh beers from the fridge before sitting down at the table.

Viggo shrugs and smiles at Eric before he turns to the stove. “Well, the world holds many pleasant surprises in store,” he muses.

Eric settles back in his chair and opens his beer.

“Indeed it does.”
Afterwards, Viggo stares up at the ceiling of Eric's bedroom, white, safe for a couple of black flecks where Eric squashed mosquitoes last summer or the one before that. His skin feels clammy, cold sweat like a damp old sheet draped over him, his soft cock sort of sticks to his thigh.

Eric's bed isn't that big. Just four feet wide, and it was still a bitch to get through the door, Viggo laughingly threatening to just saw it in half right before they managed it after all. But he and Eric still don't touch anywhere right now.

'Well, that was -' Eric says into the silence, 'something.'

Something.

Viggo's throat makes a sound of acknowledgment, somewhat regretful. He doesn't particularly like it, but it is better than the hisses of vague discomfort and aborted sentences ('Could you just -', 'No, it's not –', 'Maybe let's – ') that still hang in the stuffy air around them.

Something.

'Yeah,' Viggo says.

Eric smacks his lips and scratches his chin. The skin of Viggo's neck throbs dully from beardburn.

Eric reaches under the sheet that's covering them, and with a quiet grunt pulls off the condom to toss it in the bin left of the bed. The sound reminds Viggo of medical gloves and hospitals.

The mattress shifts when Eric lies back down.

'Well, it won't make the list of our Top Five most graceful moments, that's for sure', he says.

He doesn't sound like a man who just had possibly the worst sex in his life. He sounds like James Brayshaw commenting on a slightly mediocre cricket match.

Viggo turns his head on his clumpy pillow. Eric is scrunching up his face as if he's trying to get the hair sticking to his forehead to go away.

'You made a list of our most graceful moments?' Viggo asks.

Eric brushes his hair back, fingers momentarily catching on a knot.

'No, I guess I'd just copypaste yours.'

Viggo shakes his head slightly.

'I never made a list like that.'
Eric gives up trying to untangle his messy hair and rolls onto his side to face him, head pillowed on his bent arm.

'New Year 2006.'

Viggo tries to think back to that day, but all he can come up with is that they celebrated at Bernie's. He doesn't think there was anything special about that night, and, given who the host was, they probably got really drunk, which isn't the best basis for gracefulness.

'How is that in the Top Five?' he asks.

'Didn't say it was', Eric says. 'It's when you came up with that list, New Year 2006. But hey, never mind, it's not important.'

He lifts his left shoulder in a shrug and the motion causes the muscles in his upper arm, his broad chest to flex under his skin. Viggo stares at the hollow right above his collarbone, and for a beat or two his heart picks up the pace. Then his brain catches up and he remembers his lips there, Eric's disconcerted grunt as his hands on Viggo's hip tried to adjust him. He blinks the memory away, but his eyes don't want to linger there any longer.

When he looks up, of course Eric is watching him. Viggo can't say with one hundred percent certainty what that thing is in his eyes, and that has to be a first in he doesn't know how many years. When Viggo feels his own brows knitting together in the slightest of frowns, Eric casts his eyes down momentarily.

'What did I put on it?' Viggo asks. 'The list, I mean.'

Eric gives Viggo a smile, then he flops onto his back as he thinks about it. The sheet barely covers his hipbones, and he scratches his stomach as he thinks for a moment.

Viggo lets his gaze drift to the half open window. Tree tops show in the bottom of the frame with torn clouds on a blue sky above. The indistinct chatter of pupils playing cricket on the lawn behind Arnor House drifts into the room. It reminds Viggo that they'll need to find a new bowler for JC's team soon. His shoulders tense instinctively as he thinks about throwing the ball towards the wicket; he feels stiff, and naked, and tender.

Next to him, Eric chuckles quietly. It's evident from the change in his expression that he's found something.

'That time we picked out a blue suit for you for that Argentinian wedding. That was on your list, I think as number four. That shop in Seville Row, remember?'

Viggo does. His own indecisiveness nearly drove everyone in the shop insane, everyone except for Eric who took off his blue striped tie and put it around Viggo's neck, so they could see how the suit would look properly done up.

'That was a nice suit,' he says.

'Yeah, it looked good on you,' Eric agrees. 'We tested if you could dance in it in the middle of that posh shop.'

And Viggo definitely remembers that. He isn't a bad dancer, has fun with most Latin American styles, but in comparison to Eric? Eric would make for the perfect dance instructor, a fact that numerous of Viggo's sixth formers, eager to learn, have taken advantage of. With them he's ever patient and polite, even though he could care less, only really enjoys it when it's for a laugh, like that time in the clothing store. When he leads, he's all natural grace and instinctive rhythm, and
you'd think that it would effortlessly translate to the bedroom –

'That dancing number was elegant as fuck.'

Eric's words interrupt Viggo's thoughts just before they can derail again. He turns his head towards Viggo.

'Until you asshole stepped on my feet.'

He says it with so much accusation that Viggo can't help but laugh. It makes the muscles in his jaw and cheeks relax, and he rubs his face in response to the tingling sensation. Eric's mock dismay dissipates instantly in favour of a grin.

'That's probably why I only slotted it in as number four', Viggo offers.

'Yeah, your naked smelly feet ruined it,' Eric replies, once again mimicking affront.

Viggo snorts.

'You love my feet, you dick.'

Under the sheet, he stretches out his leg to kick Eric's naked shin. Eric yelps in surprise at the touch (the first one, after), but responds in kind and flops onto his side to nudge Viggo's foot away with his own.

'I love you and that happens to include your feet', he corrects reasonably. But because he's Eric and he's Viggo's best mate, he won't pass up the opportunity of following that up with something gross. 'I mean sure, I'd love you more if you had footless stumps.'

Viggo's brain instantly helpfully supplies a mental image to that, and he pulls a face.

'What you lack in dance moves,' Eric adds with evident satisfaction, 'I make up for in articulateness.'

Viggo doesn't kick him again but half-sits up to reach for the bottle of water on the nightstand. The angle isn't quite right and with the back of his hand, he knocks against the bottle of lube stood there. For a moment it sways, but before Viggo can grab it, it overbalances and falls to the floor, rolling under the bed.

Eric snickers.

Viggo takes a swig from the water and when Eric is still snickering, he almost spits at him, probably would have, normally. Eric even seems to expect it because it takes him a second to react when instead, Viggo just holds the plastic bottle out to him.

As Eric drinks the rest, Viggo watches his throat working as he swallows. Once done, Eric just tosses the empty bottle over his shoulder, and it lands on the pile of their discarded clothes on the chair next to the window.

Viggo smirks, and Eric's eyebrows hop up. Eric grins, and Viggo chuckles.

They settle back down and for a while they just lie there, facing each other, and the only sound comes from pigeons in the birch tree outside the window. They sound like Boing 747s crash-landing, which is noisy and oddly comforting.

'That waterfall incident in Ireland,' Eric says and waits until Viggo's eyes focus on him again.
'That was definitely in the top five as well.'

Again, Viggo's mind instantly provides images, like a myriad of pop ups on his phone.

'The infamous trip with Susanna Moore, Francine Atherton and the babbling brook?' he asks, even though it must have been that class trip, there's no doubt about it. 'That's on there? How was that graceful?'

'Hey, we didn't fall in.'

'No, but an entire class of lower sixers did.'

'That they did. Remember their faces?'

Eric stretches out his arms as if frantically trying to balance himself out, an expression of suspended horror – exactly like the one you sport the second you know you're going to fall into the water below.

But the sudden movement brings him precariously close to the edge of his bed, and for half a second he flails for real before Viggo grabs his right arm and pulls him back. The momentary surprise on Eric's features collapses in on itself, and he starts laughing. He buries his face in the crook of his arm, wipes his temple on his bicep.

'What the fuck is wrong with me today?' he asks abruptly.

He is still laughing but something shifted in his voice, and his eyes are serious.

'Why was this so fucking bad, Viggo?'

And God, Viggo loves him.

Eric looks at him, head again propped on his bent arm, and he waits like he actually expects Viggo to have an answer. Viggo, Who is a mess at the best of times, and that is when lube isn't drying between his buttocks and he hasn't probably pulled a muscle in his thigh. Eric is an idiot, and Viggo loves him.

He lifts his shoulder and lets it drop again. Maybe bad sex is the universe's way of joking at their expense. Perhaps it's just a thing of finding a rhythm that fits. Probably he'll think of it like that later, when he isn't still feeling sore in a way that really has nothing to do with satisfaction, when Eric stopped looking vaguely unsettled.

He lets his palm slide down Eric's arm to his wrist, naked after he's taken off his heavy chrome watch because Viggo managed to get his pubic hair caught in the chain. He lets his fingers encircle Eric's thick wrist, his thumb presses against the inside of it. Eric's hand is pliant under his touch, his pulse thrumming steadily against Viggo's fingertip.

It's the first touch this afternoon that isn't somehow too hard, badly timed, increasingly strained.

Eric shuffles closer, so they share the same pillow. He closes his eyes and leans his forehead against Viggo's.

'Talk to me', he says quietly.

Viggo tightens his grip a little bit, Eric hums in response, and the sound isn't somehow uncomfortable, determinedly amused, quietly irritated.
'I don't know why', Viggo says. 'But I don't care.'

Eric's lips make a smacking sound as he licks them and he cups the back of Viggo's neck. His hand is a bit sticky.

'You know I can tell when you're lying.'

But Viggo isn't, not really. He lets go of Eric's wrist to place his hand above Eric's heart. The hair on his skin is coarse against Viggo's palm, and Eric inhales and exhales steadily, so Viggo can feel the rise and fall of his chest.

'It doesn't matter', Viggo corrects himself, and the simple words feel right, are like gravity. 'It doesn't.'

Eric gives a minimal nod.

'Okay, yeah.'

Viggo's hand curls loosely under Eric's chin and with a twitch of his fingers, he nudges it lightly.

'You know, next time?'

Eric hums and it's both an acknowledgment that he heard the question and an agreement that there will be a next time.

'Next time', Viggo says, 'you could start by not head-butting me.'

He tried to keep his voice neutral, to not give away the joke, but Eric instantly pulls back and his smile is of course impossibly wide, even as his brows arch upwards.

'Hey, that was your fault!' he protests laughingly and Viggo just grins at him, so he shakes his head and settles back down.

'Like I said, not one of our top five most graceful moments.'

Viggo chuckles and inhales, and the air still tastes of sweat and the curry they had earlier.

'I don't know. I think, given how that list should really be titled “Eric's and Viggo's awkward fuck ups”, it probably clocks in at a solid number two.'

'Just number two?'

'Yeah, mate. Remember that time in India with the cricket bat and the bus?'

Eric's face instantly contorts, like he bit down on a lemon while someone was tickling him at the same time, and he squeezes his eyes shut and buries his face in their pillow. He groans between laughs.

'Oh God, why would you remind me of that? I successfully repressed that memory.'

'I dunno, just to give this some perspective.'

Eric snorts, like he doesn't believe a word Viggo is saying, then he wipes his tears of laughter away with his sticky hand and looks at Viggo again. The laugh lines around his eyes are still there, and they deepen when Viggo touches them with his fingertips before dropping his hand between them once more.
For a couple of minutes, there is silence between them, and Viggo watches Eric, then Eric smiles to himself.

“You know, I was thinking,” he says, “What do you think about trying out Bradley James as our new bowler?”

Viggo arches one brow.

“You’re thinking about cricket now?”

Eric lifts his shoulder in a shrug.

“I’m always thinking about cricket’, he says easily, and his eyes are still on Viggo. ‘Unless you want to talk about how to improve our sex life?”

Viggo laughs and shakes his head as he half sits up and rubs his hip.

“No, I’m good. But can we grab a shower before we talk about our team? Cause I feel -’

‘Rank?’ Eric finishes for him as he swings his legs out of bed. ‘You and me both.’

He turns in the frame of the door to glance back at Viggo.

‘My shower should fit us both’, he says with a smile. ‘C’mom.’
Lies require commitment

Chapter Summary

Bernard's perspective on Jackson College's yearly class trip to London (July 2013)

Title: (Lies require) Commitment
Fandom: Lotr RPS, boarding school AU
Characters: mainly Bernard Hill, Dom Monaghan, Orlando Bloom, Sean Bean, Viggo Mortensen, Eric Bana
Word Count: 8.600
Rating: PG13
Disclaimer: None of this is true.
A/N: This is the seventh story in my boarding school AU in which they are all teachers in (what a surprise) a boarding school. No need to have read any of the previous bits. – This is littered with various quotes from all over the place, mostly it’s Shakespeare; the title is a quote from Veronica Roth. - Huge thanks to for all the encouragement!

Bernard teaches English Lit, he has an appreciation for 19th century novelists that some deem obsessive, and he is considerably more handsome than other people his age. He is also now old enough to be unashamedly self-indulgent. And he has always seen his life in terms of a novel.

He is not necessarily the protagonist in all chapters of that novel – having a child will do that to you, and teaching other people’s kids for decades has a multiplying effect. He is, however, always the narrator, and he really likes to think of himself as an omniscient one. He doesn’t give a flying fuck that modern narratology thinks it an obsolete construct. The problem with your average academic is that he just doesn’t have enough source material to justify and warrant an authorial narration. Bernard’s head, however, is full of unwritten books about the minutiae of life.

So much for a foreword. As for the framework, Bernard can easily establish that:

So far, his class trip to London has gone splendidly. On the first night, he did rounds in the youth hostel they are staying in. At around two in the morning, he scared the living hell out of his most notorious sixth formers. That should give him a week’s worth of half way peaceful sleep. And honestly, the only thing Bernard needs on a class trip is his usual seven hours of sleep. Then nothing short of a plane crash can destroy his calm.

Bernard and Dom booked a tour through the Egyptian part of the British Museum for the kids. The guide assigned to them is a bit on the boring side, granted, but Bernard is skilled enough to accidentally nudge those students that are close to nodding off. In the back, Dom (voice remarkably subdued) offers a sort of spontaneous alternative programme and tells tall tales about his trip to the Seychelles.

Their tour ends after two hours. By then, they collectively stared at a dozen sarcophaguses. Bernard still reckons that his pupils can barely tell the difference between Nefertiti and Lady Gaga. But no one broke anything, and Noah Winters didn’t wander off, so Bernard counts this as an overall success (he has lost a kid in at Madame Tussaud’s once, since then he is quite particular
about counting them every half hour or so).

After the tour guide has bid them adieu, Bernard clears his throat, and everyone falls silent. Dom’s stomach rumbles. Bernard can’t help but agree with Dom’s intestines, he is rather peckish as well. And glancing over the blonde heads of three of his kids, he catches a glimpse at the museum’s café.

When Bernard announces that they will stay in the museum for another hour, he earns collective sighs, only here and there broken up by quiet ‘aces’ from the culture geeks. Bernard has been a teacher for long enough to be completely immune against the first and still be pleased about the second. He mimics Antonia Thomas’s eyeroll, including her open-mouthed lovemaking to her chewing gum. She blushes, shuts her mouth and gives him a sheepish smile. Bernard promises them a free afternoon if they don’t nick anything from the exhibition, and a couple more faces light up. And after a token synchronizing of watches, he sends them off for another hour of chilling in the past.

Bernard and Dom find themselves a nice place in the café. Bernard automatically chooses the spot that allows them optimal view over the entrance hall while at the same time being half way secluded. Spy or teacher, both require a similar set of skills. Dom has already whipped out his phone again. He has yet to look up from it. Bernard doesn’t mind. It means that he has the menu all for himself and can do experimental cake orders in Dom’s name. Naturally he takes advantage of that. He also watches Dom and tries to suss out what he is doing with his phone. A professional hones his skills even when on break. It’s pivotal these days to know what kids use their phones for; Bernard can, just from the looks on their faces. He prides himself that he can tell by the furrowing of a brow, the dilation of pupils whether a student of his is currently looking up answers on Wikipedia or is browsing the internet for porn. Bernard doesn’t object to either on principle, but only when it happens to occur during his English lessons.

Judging from the smirk on Dom’s lips, he is doing neither at the moment. He is texting Elijah.

Years (and yes, even decades) blur a bit in Bernard’s memory. He is pretty certain that he remembers the day he first walked into the classroom filled with ten and eleven year olds, Dom and Elijah amongst them. He is pretty sure that Dom made an impression on him on that first day by stuffing half of his rubber up his nose. And Elijah stared at him during that entire first lesson with such intensity that Bernard was sure he needed glasses. It might have been other kids, however. The only images that Bernard really has in his head are copied from photos, shown to him much later. But it isn’t really vital whether every anecdote he remembers about their student days is factual.

Dom reminds him of Kim Miles, or probably (for the sake of chronology) it is the other way around. Kim has just recently cut his hair to a Mohawk and bleached it, solely because Robert Sheehan dared him to. With Dom, Bernard remembers, it was the result of a lost bet against Elijah, and then he was just too lazy to do something about the mild catastrophe on his head. It may be a little shallow, a sign of a very lazy characterisation by the narrator, but that really is Dom in a nutshell to Bernard.

In the café of the British Museum, Dom only puts his phone down when their waitress places his coffee and a plate in front of him. Her cleavage isn’t particularly preponderant, but that doesn’t stop Dom from looking anyway. The smile on his lips disappears, however, when he glances at his plate. Bernard took the liberty of ordering for him, and he picked something called ‘chocolate chili inferno’. Dom blinks at Bernard once, and Bernard offers him five quid if he manages to eat the whole thing in under two minutes. Instantly, Dom piles a huge piece of cake onto his fork and shoves it into his mouth. Chewing on it, he loads his fork again. He uses his free hand to preemptively hold out his hand in Bernard’s general direction, and makes a ‘gimme’ motion.
Bernard isn’t new to the game though, he won’t pay until Dom has stuffed all of the cake into his mouth. Bernard actually has no recollection of what the staff did during lesson breaks before Dom and his slightly worrying gambling addiction came along. Nowadays they bet on everything: They bet on how long it will take for Harry to randomly burst into Latin, the amount of times Christopher says ‘decent’ over the course of a day, the amount of days in a month on which Karl wears something other than tracksuit trousers. They bet on Sean’s chances with yet another blond mom, on the duration between two of Eric’s accidental kitchen fires, on the means Viggo will use to put out said fires (whipped cream, on one memorable occasion). They bet on everything.

Bets on Bernard are generally either about a. his tendency to (mis)quote Shakespeare, b. his habit to say that he is going to quit his job, or c. the amount of minutes he can be part of a conversation without derailing it with a pointless anecdote. Bernard knows because he likes to stay on top of these things. That way he can have a wager on himself and then fix the race.

Looking like a demented chipmunk, Dom fistpumps the air after 105 seconds; job done. He pockets Bernard’s five quid and then they bet on the percentage of kids who will be on time for their meeting. Dom also coerces Bernard into wager on the half-life of Shannon McNamara’s and Sebastian Phelp’s relationship. Bernard freely admits to being open to all kinds of information as well, but he hasn’t got the foggiest where Dom gets his data on some student’s barely legal activities and/or their sex lives (not love. Sex. Bernard will never be able to set foot into the upper floor broom closet again.)

Dom has to take a momentary break from mentally scarring Bernard permanently when their hour is up. Bernard buys himself a Kitkat which he then proceeds to eat while they wait for the children to return. His kids have a couple of redeeming qualities (being halfway literate is one of them), but punctuality is more of a general suggestion to them than an actual objective. Better three hours too late than a minute too soon. Bernard makes an easy ten quid with that knowledge. But Shannon McNamara’s decidedly pouty expression and the dirty looks she gives Claire Madison don’t bode well for Bernard’s wager in the relationship category.

Bernard reminds them all of their next point on their agenda – a performance of “The Comedy Of Errors” in the Globe in the evening. Then he tells everyone but Noah Winters to make sure Noah Winters doesn’t get lost, something for which Noah Winters unrightfully doesn’t show any appreciation at all. Then Bernard wishes them all a lovely afternoon and ushers them out.

Dom whips his mobile out again as he and Bernard are still walking down the stairs in front of the museum. Two minutes later, he announces that he will conquer the city on his own and calls Viggo an ‘uncultured bum’ and Eric a ‘fucking lazy enabler’ (neither without affection, though). As Dom hurries off, he nearly gets run over by a car because he still doesn’t look up from his mobile.

Bernard is concerned for a moment, but just like his worry for his kids, this passes very quickly. He decides that a stroll in the park will make his afternoon pretty much perfect.

In St James Park, he stumbles over Viggo and Eric. He literally stumbles over them because Viggo has set up camp near the lake, and his heterosexual lifemate is stretched out beside him, his long legs a health hazard for passerbys. As per usual, they aren’t alone but have a handful of Viggo’s sixth formers with them.

For a long time, Bernard pitied Viggo for his obvious ineptitude to rid himself of his kids, and privately thought that Eric (who is extraordinarily versed at not caring about his kids’ whereabouts) should give his best mate some pointers. Then Bernard realized that Viggo actually likes having his students around, and furthermore (and this is even more baffling to Bernard), they like being around him. (R.E. teaching is, in Bernard’s head, too firmly connected with the image of nuns disciplining little boys with rulers for him to be able to ever really appreciate Viggo’s
company. Although Viggo would, admittedly, make a terrible nun – he is hellishly promiscuous and really does not have the face for a coif and a veil either.)

When Bernard joins the impromptu flower power collective on the lawn, the first thing he does of course is comment on the hippieness of it. Eric doesn’t respond which is when Bernard realises that, behind his sunglasses, Eric is either asleep, in a coma, or dead (since Bernard still owes him money, he hopes the latter, but he suspects the first). Vincent Marc and Victoria Stratham give Bernard a look ranging between confusion and disapproval in response to his hippie remark – Bernard gets that a lot, his wit is scarcely appreciated by people under twenty-five.

Only Viggo grins toothily at Bernard, plucks a leaf of grass and slips it between his lips to chew on as he lies back on the lawn; generously completing the stereotype solely for Bernard’s sake. (Viggo is so very good at that, arranging himself to please other people, that he is about as easily to grip as an electric eel).

Bernard listens for a while as Vincent Marc, Victoria Stratham, and Viola Foster talk about Anselm of Canterbury. Viola repeatedly turns towards Viggo and asks his opinion on something – about which ‘things’ can be called ‘good’, about the relationship of ‘reason’ to ‘revealed truth’, about the relationship of ‘Vincent Marc’ to ‘being a completely ignorant twat’.

Viggo answers in the same way he does when they are out drinking, it is way past midnight and beer has already acted as a universal pacifier. To each question directed at him, he responds with a question of his own. In the pub, Orlando regularly tears him to shreds for this, Bernard responds with random Milton quotes, and Sean just buys another round. However, Viggo’s kids jump on the questions like a pack of hungry dogs would on a chunk of meat. Viggo is their guru, the bloke who shows up out of nowhere and says some words that could be stolen from a greeting card, could be the true wisdom of the universe.

That comparison isn’t Bernard’s. Viggo himself came up with it once, very late in the pub. This not particularly humble self-reflection was followed by an outburst of hysterical laughter from Eric. For five minutes straight, he laughed and laughed, looked at Viggo’s serious expression, and laughed some more. (Bernard has seldom met people who like being laughed at. Teenagers react particularly sensitive to that for some reason, but it’s quite the same with adults: Laugh at Karl and he will punch you, laugh at Orlando and he will rip your soul out, laugh at Sean and the next morning a bunch of fifth formers will have TP’ed your car. People don’t generally laugh at Viggo, except for Eric who does it a lot.)

That night – the Guru-greeting-card-night – Eric managed to get himself under control eventually. Bernard put a pint in front of him, and Viggo waited until Eric had taken a good mouthful of it, then he quoted a line from ‘Eat, Pray, Love’. Eric spluttered beer all over the place (mostly over Orlando) as he was nearly choking on his laughter. And as Orlando directed the visual equivalent of Tesla’s death ray in Eric’s direction, Viggo got up and patted Eric’s back as if he was encouraging a giant toddler to burp.

That much consideration is solely reserved for the great Australian snickerpuss, though. Back in the religious enclave in St James Park, Viggo follows his kids’ conversation merely for a couple of seconds before he loses interest. It reminds Bernard of when he has to teach ‘The Catcher in the Rye’. The book is so stuffed with teenage angst that Bernard fears he might get pimples from having to re-read it. Bernard, however, doesn’t harbour the temporary illusion that his pupils might actually be good for an epiphany. Sometimes he wonders how many bottles of metaphorical Clearasil Viggo has to go through in a month.

Since Viggo’s kids once more fall surprisingly short of finding proof of God on this fine late afternoon, Viggo turns to Bernard for entertainment. Bernard happily tells Viggo that Noah Winters got himself trapped in the Egyptian section of the British Museum and that they got 50%
off their guided tour because Kim Miles offered to shag the cashier. Neither story is particularly true but both very well could be, and in Bernard’s opinion, that is the important thing. Still, Bernard gets the distinct impression that Viggo doesn’t believe him. But he doesn’t take that personally. More or less well concealed skepticism is Viggo’s usual reaction to anything aside from first class cricket and words coming out of Eric’s mouth.

Naively, Bernard then asks Viggo about his day. Seconds later, he finds himself the centre of attention of a pack of eager puppies aka Viggo’s enthusiastic pupils. And whatever they learn in Viggo’s lessons, stringent storytelling isn’t one of those things.

With some considerable effort, Bernard concludes from their disjointed anecdotes that the entire class trip is a big competition between Eric’s pupils and Viggo’s. Apparently, Eric’s math geeks won the round where they, like, mucked out kilometres of stables in one of London’s well wicked City Farms. Viggo’s kids were well superior in turning their visit to Madame Tussaud’s into an absolutely brutal photo story. Ernie Whiteman snatched points for the mathematicians by collecting the most minging shit that the market on Portobello Road had to offer (some kind of, like, sorta smelly meat jelly). Only Vincent Marc insists that it totally was Mr Bana who spotted that stuff which totally makes it cheating.

Eric chooses this moment to wake up. He very pleasantly asks Vincent to stop spreading outrageous falsehoods. What he, in fact, says is ‘Shut your cakehole, or I’ll tan your hide’. Bernard knows for a fact that Eric doesn’t give a koala’s arse about his reputation. But Vincent looks like a baby kangaroo in the headlights of a prime mover and shuts up immediately.

Eric sits up and there are grass blades sticking to his shirt and his hair. Viggo squints at the non-pattern they form like they were some sort of pointillist art instalment. Eric yawns and only as he does so, he notices Bernard and his yawn transforms into a huge, open-mouthed grin of hello. Then Eric frantically rubs through his hair and looks a little forlorn for a moment until Viggo tosses him a bag of crisps.

Eric instantly rips it open and starts munching, but the tiny bag doesn’t look like it can contain his hunger for long. Bernard is convinced that the school rules forbid cannibalism, but as the bag is nearing its end, Eric starts eyeing Viggo’s pupils pensively. They, in turn, start fidgeting and, to Bernard’s endless amusement, bid a rather hasty retreat.

Watching them scuttle off, Eric licks his fingers clean, and then he turns to look at Viggo. Viggo arches an eyebrow in his direction, and Eric shrugs. Viggo purses his mouth, and Eric smacks his lips. Viggo tilts his head, and Eric nods. They both get up. Eric stuffs the empty bag into the back pocket of his slacks, and Viggo half-heartedly rubs at a grass stain on his jeans. They both look at Bernard expectantly.

Bernard also gets to his feet and toddles along, but he has no idea what is going on. Sadly, he is not fluent in the secret language of Siamese soul-twins. But from what transpires in the next quarter of an hour, the collection of nonverbal non-sequiturs was a very elaborate conversation on where and when to grab a late lunch.

When they each hold a giant kebab in their hands, Viggo beams like a long lost pilgrim finally reaching the Promised Land. Eric makes noises like a Tasmanian devil in heat as he devours his kebab. Bernard appreciates the truckload of onions that is going to make his breath recognizable for days. But in all honesty, he usually prefers having lunch while sitting down, not while nearly getting run over by a taxi because Viggo decided to randomly cross the street.

After they have dined like plebs, Bernard suggests a trip to the Gentlemen’s Tonic in Savile Row. Eric and Viggo both are intrigued by the fact that the Gentlemen’s Tonic serves drinks to go with the shave and the haircut, as Bernard knew they would be. In the shop, they sit down in the
perversely comfortable chairs, and Bernard offers to pay for Viggo’s treatment under the condition that Viggo gets rid of his beard. Bernard proposes that partly because truly, that thing on Viggo’s face is hideous, and it pains him to look at it. But he also has a bet going with Harry that Viggo will return from London clean-shaven. And the pay-out from that will reimburse Bernard for Viggo’s shave and his own.

Sadly, Viggo refuses to cooperate because apparently he has grown attached to the abysmal sprouts on his face. Eric counteroffers that he would agree to a buzz-cut if Bernard paid for Eric’s and Viggo’s next trip to London. Eric is a handsome man, but he does not wear bald well, and Bernard doesn’t see any advantage in having Eric run around like a giant walking potato.

Viggo ends up getting a Van Dyke. It won’t make Harry pay up, but it will make Viggo look faintly like Napoleon III and will probably endear him to Sean.

As they get shaved, Eric sets the record straight on how the battle of Team Bana vs. Team Mortensen went down in reality, or rather his version of reality. The treasure hunt on Portobello Road turns into a guerrilla war, and Eric makes Viggo out to be some sort of evil mastermind. He improvises a rather lengthy motivational speech that he insists Viggo held for his troops, surrounded by wax statues at Madame Tussaud’s.

Eric effortlessly mimics the voices and facial expressions of their pupils – for a 6’2’’ behemoth, he makes very convincing 16 year old girls – and he absolutely nails Viggo’s speech pattern and dramatic gusto. Temporarily, Bernard fears for his life because the barber shaving him is giggling uncontrollably. And even Viggo is too busy cackling to retaliate in kind with even an attempt at Eric’s broad Strine.

Despite the near-death experience, Bernard is greatly entertained and not at all surprised; neither by this tale nor by the following blow-by-blow rehashing of their last staff meeting, done in several different voices and accents. Eric has always been incredibly, frighteningly good at imitating others. So good that Bernard frequently asks himself whether anyone ever gets to see the real Eric.

Since Australia has bird eating spiders and stone fish, Bernard wouldn’t be surprised to find ‘giant hulk-shaped chameleon’ on the list of Down Under’s fauna. (Bernard is not a biology teacher. But he does not shy away from overused, clichéd animal metaphors. What is good enough for Ted Hughes, is good enough for him.)

Only where Viggo is concerned, Eric is pretty much identical to the Saint Bernard that Marianne got Bernard for their seventh wedding anniversary. Albus constantly shadowed Bernard and his wife and insisted on sleeping in the same bed as them. He even made attempts to be included into their lovemaking. It was even more troubling to Bernard than being followed to the loo.

To Bernard’s knowledge, Eric doesn’t chase cats up trees to bark at them for two hours (which was Albus’s only other raison d’etre). Neither does he appear to have any other great outstanding passions aside from being a huge beggar’s button.

According to the kids, in Math with Mr Bana, the arithmetically challenged don’t get spontaneously converted to lovers of Pie, but Mr Bana isn’t unfair or terribly strict, and his tests aren’t horribly difficult. The kids don’t praise his abilities as a teacher, but they don’t complain about them either. There really are usually only two circumstances under which pupils talk about Eric. Either when they allege an indecent relationship between Eric and his calculator, or when they insinuate one between him and Viggo.

Most of the kids pronounce ‘Mr Mortensen and Mr Bana’ as if it was one word which makes Bernard want to weep for the quality of elocution every time. According to hallway grapevine
Phoebe Cook, from Bernard’s A-level, to be more specific), Mortenbana secretly got hitched in Vegas, adopted an Argentinian orphan with dyscalculia, and plan to give up teaching in order to open up a souvenir shop in the Vatican.

While this tells Bernard nothing at all about Eric, it shows at least that Phoebe Cook has taken to heart what she has learned in class about political correctness. Especially in comparison to Eric’s bunch of random, slightly anti-social strays, Bernard’s kids are basically the equivalent to a pack of well-groomed, house-trained show-poodles.

One of said show-poodles – Melissa Partridge, future top manager – sends Bernard a text that pulls him out of his contemplations. She wants to know whether he has already picked up the tickets for tonight’s play or whether she and her girl-friends should do so.

On the first day of their trip, Bernard has appointed Melissa his second in command. He intended it to be more of an honorary position, so that he wouldn’t be the only one to blame in case he forgot something. But she takes her job very seriously, much to Dom’s dismay. But Bernard has to admit one thing: Neither he nor Dom even so much as thought about picking up these tickets so far.

Thankfully, neither Eric nor Viggo get wind of Bernard’s embarrassing realisation. As Bernard drifted off under the caring hands of his barber, Eric’s and Viggo’s conversation revolved mainly around Cricket. At least Bernard thinks it does; he doesn’t really give a toss about any conversation revolunving around sport that doesn’t include United. But still, if Bernard had less self-esteem he would have to seek reassurance from the many mirrors in the barber shop, proving that he hasn’t turned invisible. Half of what Eric and Viggo toss back and forth between them sounds like completely random gibberish but is most possibly a really crude inside joke between them.

Once the barbers are done with them, Viggo looks like the villain from a Kung Fu B-movie from the 1960s. Eric stares at the new beard on Viggo’s face as if food got stuck in it. He also seems oddly transfixed when Viggo notices and starts stroking his chin beard in mock contemplation. Spontaneously, Eric and Viggo decide to spend the rest of the afternoon on spying on their pupils. When Bernard idly enquires why they would do such a thing, Viggo shrugs and says ‘to scare the shit out of them, of course’. Eric explains that ‘that’s always fucking hilarious’. In their strange little world, this probably counts as a perfect date.

This thought as well as the definite demise of Sebastian’s and Shannon McNamara’s relationship reminds Bernard that love needs constant maintenance.

Consequently, he splits from Eric and Viggo and heads to Oxford Street to buy his wife a present. He always does this when he is away on a class trip and only very rarely it is to make up for accidental nights spend in strip clubs. In a quite fancy shoe shop, Bernard picks out very nice turquoise clog sandals. The shop assistant is very obliging, even though Bernard has to tell her thrice that he needs the sandals in a size 6, not a 9.5.

Having once again proven that he is a considerate husband, he moves on to treating himself.

With bags from some rather fancy tailors dangling from his wrist, Bernard happens to run in to a group of giggling girls from his A-levels. They carry pink bags from Victoria’s Secret, and as they spot Bernard, they try to hide them behind their backs. Bernard has tact enough to not ask them about their purchases. Instead he enquires whether they got Noah Winters to toddle along with them, so Noah won’t get lost. Bernard can see red blooming on their cheeks as the girls shake their heads.

Bernard appreciates that Antonia Thomas and Martina Sanchez try to mend Shannon McNamara’s broken heart by helping her pick out flimsy underwear. Beauty is nature’s brag after
all, as well as that of seventeen year old girls. And of course Shannon immediately has to get back on the horse and needs an (in)appropriate outfit to seduce a random new lad whose name isn’t Sebastian Phelp. Bernard also doubts that Noah getting accidentally tangled in Victoria’s Secret lingerie is the girls’ idea of a great afternoon.

However, Bernard is also a bit shirty that they neglected their part in the ongoing ‘teaching Noah how to become a homing pigeon’. Bernard made it abundantly clear that is a shared burden they all have to carry.

So, as a punishment, he makes the girls look at the clog sandals he bought. At length he gushes about the softness of their leather, and he conveniently leaves out that the shoes are for his wife. The eyes of Martina, Antonia, and Shannon grow wide as undoubtedly scenes of the ‘Some like it hot’ variety unfold in their heads. They actually look a bit green in the face as they stutter ‘ooh, that’s nice, Mr Hill’ before they flee the scene.

For a moment Bernard, contemplates whether he should try and contact Noah Winters before the boy accidentally falls victim to a human trafficking ring, shipping him to Transylvania. Noah is extraordinarily versed in going astray. But Bernard very much believes in his own system of marooning his kids in the wilderness and then finding the next recreational spot.

Consequently, Bernard takes the Tube to Leicester Square and collects a myriad of flyers promoting various plays and musicals as well as an ice-cream and a paper cup of coffee. Then he conquers a bench in the little park and studies his flyers. There is a young man with a guitar sitting next to him, singing Oasis songs. Bernard only notices that he has started singing along when a passerby drops a pound coin into the coffee cup he is still holding.

After about twenty minutes of bliss like this, however, it comes to his attention that not fifteen feet from him, Sebastian Phelp is frolicking in the sun-warmed grass with Claire Madison. The thus undeniably lost bet against Dom makes Bernard want to seek out greener pastures.

He ambles over to the Thames, and gets into a curious argument with an angry little Korean woman carrying several honey melons. He initially thinks she was trying to sell some of them to him, but over the course of the conversation – which she conducts in Korean, a language Bernard is not exactly fluent in – it occurs to him that she reckons he was propositioning to her, something she didn’t completely disapprove of, no matter the yelling.

A call from Orlando saves him from an unfortunate marriage.

Actually, it surprises Bernard that Orlando even has time to call him. On a class trip like this one, Orlando demands everything from his pupils. In comparison to his daily schedule, participating in the French Revolution equals a stay in a health spa. Orlando has always thought eating and sleeping weaknesses. In his time as a pupil in Jackson College, this meant plots to overthrow the government (namely, Christopher) during ungodly hours. Today, it means that Orlando goes through more ‘educationally valuable activities’ in five days than Bernard did during an entire month of safari in Namibia. Still, Orlando’s kids never complain or wander off; Bernard figures they are more scared of him than Bernard was of man-eating lions.

Orlando antagonizes people, always has. Bernard is pretty certain that he considers it a sport, and by now he has developed it into an art form. It’s not that he can’t or won’t be nice. He actually is rather charming most of the time (and not just towards Liv with whom Bernard strongly suspects he has been in love with for years). Bernard chats with Orlando about H.E.Bates during every other break, and his version of a face-off between John Rawls vs. Jeremy Bentham is a comedy classic. But a scalpel is shiny and pleasant to look at as well, as long as it isn’t busy cutting throats.

Orlando’s kids – particularly the ones in his A-levels – are a pack of trained pit-bulls with really
sharp fangs. They are taught to always be as fiercely armed and as keenly alert as possible; an army of little Robespierres and Saint-Justs. If you happen to have some of Orlando’s kids in your class, be prepared for them to question everything you say, everything anyone else has ever said. If surviving in the pitiless discourse that is life means killing a few feeble minded, emotionally unstable innocent bystanders in the process, then so be it. Pity is treason, after all, and a nation regenerates itself only upon heaps of corpses.

When Orlando’s number shows up on Bernard’s mobile, Bernard is this close to jumping into the Thames to save himself from the wrath of the tiny Korean melon woman. Hurriedly, he answers the call in a hushed voice; after all, he is expecting Orlando to call him from the inside of some museum. However, Orlando informs him in his normal (i.e. perpetually slightly too loud) voice that he and Sean picked up their tickets for tonight’s performance in the Globe. Then he hands his mobile over to Sean because Sean has been yelling things at Bernard in the background anyway, and Orlando doesn’t think of himself as a message service. Sean and Bernard spent a good ten minutes chatting before they realise that they are merely a couple of hundred yards apart.

When Bernard reaches the Jubilee Bridge, he sees Orlando (surrounded by his pupils) looking around. Bernard feels old for the fraction of a second. Somewhere in his head a twenty year old image just like this floats to the surface. He blames Orlando’s silly preference for black clothes that hasn’t changed in nearly two decades. It’s not good for your equilibrium, befriending people so much younger than yourself. Age, with his stealing steps, has clawed him in his clutch.

But only for a second. Then Orlando turns around, and Bernard has to laugh. For one, Sean’s mentoring is noticeably done and dusted, now also including questionable shaving habits. And secondly, the slight scowl on Orlando’s face as he is searching the crowd, it’s such a schoolmasterly expression. It makes him older again instantly, a comfortable bit over thirty easily.

Apparently they have been to Portobello Road, or some other flea market. Orlando can’t walk past stacks of old books without hoarding them like a particularly intellectual hamster on speed. Bernard can take an educated guess regarding the contents of the plastic bags he is carrying. Sean is, as per usual, even less subtle about his purchase; he is wearing it on his head. Happily, he tells Bernard that it’s a vintage flat cap from the 1930s with only minimal moth damage. The moths probably were scared off by the armies of head lice, Orlando adds.

Orlando decides on pizza for everyone for an early dinner, and Bernard joins them because he has nothing else to do, and hungry on top of that. They head to one of the touristy places near the embankment. While Orlando’s and Sean’s kids till their way through the menu, Sean and Orlando tell Bernard about their action-packed day so far. Bernard thinks it is an advanced course in the workings of stichomythia, what the two of them do. Although that isn’t precisely it, because they should be alternating in saying their lines, repetition and antithesis. What they do is more a duet, two instruments playing at the same time, on different frequencies.

As Sean and Orlando talk about their tour through the Globe, Orlando tells Bernard about the new titbits of information their guide wove in this year. Sean provides the humorous anecdotes, like how Neil Flanagan nearly fell off one of the balconies. Without him even interrupting his praise for the Dulwich Street Art Festival, Orlando’s eyes follow Tim McKinna as he ambles off to the loo. When the boy returns, Orlando very pointedly arches his eyebrows. Tim automatically wipes his hands on the front of his shirt which causes Orlando’s brows to rise further. Tim turns around and comes back with his hands still damp from washing them.

When Sean and Orlando tell Bernard about their boat trip on the River, Sean goes on about the clarity of the weather and the beauty of the sights. Orlando exposes in detail how seasick Sean and half of the kids really were which prompts Bernard to re-tell the tale of his near drowning during
his first trip with Dom.

Janice Peterson and Natasha Needham, both in Sean’s A-level, start arguing over corruption in the Premier league. Insouciantly, Sean muses about the ticket prices for Westminster, even as pizza slices are threatened to be transformed into warheads. Only just before the cold war turns actually hot, Sean bellows ‘Oi!’ without even turning his head towards Janice and Natasha. Arms are laid down instantly. Bernard swears if Sean had been Secretary of State of the USA in 1962, the resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis would have taken all but two seconds.

(Not that Bernard is surprised. Sean’s way of communicating with his kids – the ones in his house particularly – consists to 80% of bellowing at them. When he has laryngitis, which happens less often than you would expect, he borrows one of Karl’s whistles. It makes the impression even more substantial that his house really is the locker room of a football camp, or one of the bug-infested soldier camps of the Napoleonic Wars, one of Sean’s many historical happy places.)

Orlando has scheduled a tour through Southwark for his and Sean’s kids before “The Comedy of Errors” in the evening. So, eventually, Orlando gets up and starts making impatient noises. His kids hastily stuff the last remains of their pizzas into their mouths, Sean’s have long finished anyway.

Only Sean himself sturdily ignores Orlando. Bernard is, in fact, pretty certain that Sean slows down deliberately, finishing his meal with a reverence than has no other purpose than to piss Orlando off. Time and tide wait for no man but Sean Bean.

In the end, Orlando steps so close to Sean that he is practically looming over him and places a heavy hand on Sean’s shoulder, fingers tapping. It turns out that even Sean finds that disconcerting enough to agree to leave.

On his way out, Sean charms a handful of biscuits from a waitress half his age and casually whacks Callum Murphy on the back of his head for staring at her cleavage. Bernard watches them leave (Orlando’s face hidden behind a map, Sean’s distorted from biscuits stuffed into his cheeks, kids toddling behind), and then he orders a generous helping of Tiramisu and an espresso.

The last time Bernard put so much effort into educating the young in his free time was in 1987 when he (drunk off his arse) agreed to direct the school play. After that, he has come to the conclusion that he has a certain responsibility to protect national treasures such as good old William from the force of unified teenage ignorance.

But ever since Orlando returned to Jackson College as a teacher, he and Sean do their class trips together, and whichever programme Orlando thinks up, Sean just adds his ‘ditto’ to it. Bernard suspects that with Sean it’s less about the idealistic belief that a close proximity to a lot of culture will do your soul some good. Kids who have been herded through London at the double all day, they are just so thankful when they are allowed to turn in early – ‘just tire the little bastards out’ has always been one of the pillars of Sean’s teaching philosophy.

Bernard actually remembers the first time he met Sean. Some day he will sit down and write a short story about that because it’s so symbolic and foretold most of what was to come afterwards.

Sean was new to the school, and he came on the same day as the new chairs and tables for the lower floor classrooms. The moment Christopher spotted him in the car park, Sean’s broad stance, one hand in the pocket of his jeans and a fag in the corner of his mouth, got him mistaken for an extra pair of hands from the furniture company. Christopher, mastering the art of schoolmastering, instantly ordered Sean to get to work. So, Sean spent his first morning in Jackson College carrying around tables and chairs.
Even weeks later, some of the older staff looked at Sean funnily, every time he walked into the staff room. Someone even asked Bernard why the moving men were still there and were insolent enough to help themselves to the teachers’ coffee. Bernard made appropriate displeased noises of agreement and of course didn’t clear up the misunderstanding. But the next morning, when they were standing side by side waiting for the coffee machine to finish brewing, Bernard told Sean about it. Sean wasn’t even the least bit put off by that; on the contrary, it was the first time of many that his loud booming laughter turned most heads in the staff room.

A couple of weeks after that, Sean’s furniture finally arrived at Jackson College. As the Bernard and Sean unloaded his gigantic leather couch, Sean told Christopher (once again walking past by chance) to ‘give us a hand here, mate’ without batting an eye.

That particular piece of furniture – universally known in Jackson College simply as ‘the Sofa’ – is still in Sean’s rooms, more than twenty years after a flummoxed Christopher helped getting it there. ‘I spent last night on the Sofa’ is a turn of phrase regularly used in the school, especially by the less obedient pupils. If you believe Orlando, the so alluded detention includes a stern telling off as well as a hot cuppa and football discussions. Sean and Orlando continuously argue about how many hours exactly Orlando himself spent on ‘the Sofa’ in his youth. Personally, Bernard thinks both their guesses are gross underestimations. Orlando has largely suppressed what an annoying little shit he was as a teenager, and Sean grew so accustomed to his perpetual house guest that he actually invited Orlando over in the end.

Bernard, too, slept on the sofa for a couple of nights when his infant son was teething and Marianne practically threw him out, allegedly because he was driving her insane.

And speaking of insane people: Bernard gets a text from Dom just as he finished his cappuccino. The waiters in the London pizzeria aren’t as blunt as Bernard’s wife, but it seems they want to give his table to a quite hungry looking family of four. So, Bernard gets up and recommends the Pizza Hawaii on his way out.

Bernard meets Dom on the embankment near the Jubilee Bridge. Dom is draped against a streetlamp like a pole dancer who escaped from a mental facility. He is proudly displaying his chest which has less to do with his rack and more with the new t-shirt he is wearing. It’s baby blue and was obviously done in one of these ‘we print your images onto any surface’ shops on Trafalgar Square. There’s a huge photo adorning it and Dom has obviously taken it straight from Facebook. It shows Sebastian Phelp snogging Claire Madison with a verve that suggests he wants to suck her cleavage in through her lungs. Under the image, the words ‘Pay up, old man’ are printed, and Dom points at them with both hands as soon as he spots Bernard.

Bernard graciously admits defeat and stuffs the ten quid he owes Dom down the front of Dom’s shirt. Apparently, Dom really doesn’t mind being treated like a pole dancer at all, judging from the seriously gleeful expression on his face.

They still have a good half hour till they have to meet up with their kids in front of the Globe. As they take a walk alongside the river, Dom gets Bernard up to speed regarding the latest happenings back home in Jackson College.

Apparently, Dom West has been self-experimenting on the effects of alcohol (like any self-respecting Chemistry teacher does from time to time) and as a result taught his lessons in a stage of heightened inebriation. Karl made a fifth former cry around noon which brings his weekly total up to nine, Harry made his pupils in his Latin class turn their bed sheets into togas, and John took Cate out for lobster eating and nearly lost a finger.

Of course, not one of these stories is true. Bernard knows it. Dom knows it. Hell, even the deluded editors of ‘The Sun’ would cotton on to it. But the degree of truthfulness isn’t really how
you value the worth of a story anyway, is it?

When Bernard was still going on class trips with Ian Holm, they used to have competitions about who could tell the most outrageous lie to the pupils and get away with it. When Ian retired, Bernard just put off looking for someone else until two weeks before the trip.

He asked Dom when they were on the loo together. Bernard likes asking people for favours on the loo. Most find it slightly awkward to get into a longer discussion with him while they are holding their penises, so they just agree to whatever Bernard wants. Dom was so enthusiastic in his agreement that he very nearly peed on Bernard’s fairly new shoes.

When they returned from that first trip, Dom publically claimed that Bernard damaged him permanently. Just because Bernard suggested to some of the rowdier sixth formers that Mr Monaghan might enjoy being kidnapped out of his bed in the middle of the night.

When it was Dom’s turn to choose someone to accompany him, he asked Bernard straight away. Furthermore, he ambushed him on the loo, freely admitting that he had been lurking there for half an hour, so he wouldn’t miss Bernard. Who was Bernard to say no to a loo proposal like that? As it turned out, this was all a rather elaborate plan to get Bernard paddling a boat on some river and then accidentally nudge him into said waterway. Bernard went down with his ship with the grace matching that of the captain of the Titanic.

And ever since then, Bernard gladly loses the odd bet or other in exchange for having Dom, the Prince of Lies, accompanying him. It’s less ‘opposites attract’ and more ‘birds of a feather’.

When they arrive at the Globe, nearly everyone is there already, all forming a huge blob. Their pupils all chat excitedly with one another, and Bernard can spot the heads of Orlando, Sean, Viggo and particularly Eric amongst them, bobbing in the ocean of limbs like messages in a bottle. Dom is nice enough to zip up his jacket to not permanently scar the kids with his t-shirt of choice. Bernard loses sight of him for a moment after he dove into the crowd, but the sound of Sean’s booming laughter and Orlando’s slightly higher-pitched mirth tells Bernard where Dom and his revealing t-shirt have ended up.

As Bernard reaches Eric and Viggo, Viggo is still trying to perfect the art of stroking his new beard like a true Bond villain, whereas Eric helps himself to the crisps of a slightly flabbergasted Callum Murphy who is standing conveniently close to him.

Robert Sheehan and Iwan Rheon join them and actually thank Bernard for his suggestion to spend their free afternoon in the London Dungeon. And Martina Sanchez shows him the clog sandals she bought which wear a very close resemblance to Bernard’s own purchase. The grin on her face reminds him that she is one of the brightest pupils he ever had the pleasure of teaching, even if she hides it well sometimes. All the world’s a stage.

Speaking of Shakespeare, Bernard is really looking forward to this evening’s performance of “A Comedy of Errors”. His already stellar mood brightens even further when the gates are opened and they are finally allowed to enter.

The kids are, as they usually are, slightly intimidated by the unfamiliar surroundings of the Globe, and they compensate in different ways. Some huddle together and start whispering before the play even starts. Some become louder and more rowdy, until Bernard threatens that he will sit on Robert Sheehan if he doesn’t get himself under control. But eventually, everyone is seated and the play begins.

When in the second scene, Antipholus of Syracuse announces that he will go lose himself now, Bernard automatically checks whether Noah Winters is still present. But the boy sits just a couple
of seats away from Bernard, even if he doesn’t show particular interest in the play. But Bernard can let him get away with that, considering the joined hands of Noah and Melissa Partridge resting on Noah’s thigh. Melissa once again proves that she is a multitasker, able to both follow the play and smile sweetly at Noah. But in Noah’s case, love might look with the mind, but to make doubly sure, Noah uses his eyes as well to continuously stare at her.

In front of Bernard, Sebastian Phelp has his arm slung around Claire Madison’s shoulder. But Janice Peterson, who is watching golden goals on the screen of her muted smart phone, already seems much more interesting to him. Between football and Janice’s broad smile, Sebastian has no care left for either Claire or Shakespeare. But when he shifts closer to Janice and fires up his ladykiller smile, Natasha Needham, on Janice’s other side, squashes him like a ladybird. One well-placed whack on the back of Sebastian’s head is enough to make Sebastian recoil into Claire’s arms again.

Bernard can see Sean not even trying to hide his broad grin, and his quiet chuckle makes Orlando glance at Sean. Orlando’s gaze flickers from Sean to Sebastian and back. Orlando rolls his eyes, but a small smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. Still grinning broadly, Sean leans back in his seat and rests his lower arm on Orlando’s shoulder to enjoy the verbal sparring on stage.

Dom nudges Bernard. Bernard turns his head to look at him, and Dom nods at Claire who glowers at Sebastian. Dom rubs his fingertips together and arches his brows, the most economical way to suggest a wager.

Laughter erupting around them momentarily delays Bernard’s response.

On stage, Adriana and Luciana bicker over the woes of marriage—there’s none but asses will be bridled so—, and there’s continued murmuring behind Bernard. He glances over his shoulder to possible shush the source, but it’s none of their kids. Viggo is whispering something to Eric, and Eric’s responding laughter is slightly out of sync with the rest of the audience’s reaction to the play. Ignoring Ernest Whiteman’s and Vincent Marc’s bemused looks, Eric leans over to Viggo and whispers back. Viggo snickers helplessly.

Bernard gets nudged again, and Dom repeats his gesture from before. Dom’s eyebrows are still raised in a perversely seductive manner as he points at Sebastian and Claire.

Bernard knows perfectly well that teenage kids are as capable of commitment as Dom is of propriety. He nods anyway, like he always does.

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