

Chapter 2

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Mr Hopkins, the English teacher, had only just graduated from university. He was a slim, fair haired young man, with soft hazel eyes that melted when he smiled. But that wasn't often in class, for his discipline was terribly weak. With the scent of blood in their nostrils, the boys became young wolves, contempt in their baying voices. As a beginning teacher, Hopkins was not allowed to give the cane, and when he lost control, as he frequently did, his eyes became those of a hunted deer as he sent his persecutors to the headmaster for punishment. The girls, for their part, treated Hopkins like the Bambi he resembled: a cute pet to be teased with mild flirtation. Neither approach did much for the teaching of poetry.

Peter felt sorry for Mr Hopkins – and for himself. Poetry, his favourite lesson, was now a write-off. He wanted to tell his father about how his favourite teacher was being undermined but after the brush-off concerning Crayshore, he wasn't game to risk another rebuff. And he couldn't tell Hopkins that the boys weren't going to the headmaster as ordered but hung around in the corridor for a while before returning to the classroom. So all Peter did was work harder for Hopkins, writing unsolicited efforts for him, usually poems, in his ordinary homework book.

On the first day of April, 1940, the class was sitting impeccably straight, waiting for their teacher. Charlie Hawkins kept nit at the door. Seeing Hopkins approaching, he hissed: 'Right fellers, 'ere 'e comes!' Charlie slipped behind his desk and a second later was sitting with ramrod back, eyes looking straight ahead.

Hopkins stopped in the doorway, looking at the class with pleased surprise. 'Now, that's more like it, class,' he murmured. He went to the teacher's high stool, sat down, and opened the desk, as he always did. Inside, he found a neatly wrapped parcel, the size of a shoebox. 'Hello, what's this?'

He took it out and saw that it was addressed to the headmaster: 'Mr. J.C. Pendleton, B.A. Esq.' Above the address were the words: 'PERSONNEL and CONFIDENTIAL'.

'I say, was the headmaster in here last lesson or earlier today? Looks like he's forgotten something.'

Charlie raised his hand. 'Oh, yes sir, please sir, Brindley said he saw him here during recess, sir. Looked like he was in a bit of a hurry, didn't he, Brindles? Well, didn't he?' Charlie glared over his shoulder.

Brindley flushed. 'Er yes sir, somethin' like that, sir.'

'I see. Look, Hawkins, be a good chap and run it up to the headmaster's study right now.'

'*Me*, sir? Oh, no sir, if you don't mind, sir. It looks important.' Charlie leaned out of his desk, squinting at the parcel. 'Yes sir, it looks *very* important. I think *you* should take it, sir, like we might drop it or something.' He twisted round to face the class. 'Do you think one of us clumsy drongos should be trusted with the Boss's parcel?'

The girls in the class looked puzzled – there was something going on from which they had been excluded – but the boys in the class replied noisily:

'Oh no sir, you...'

'Hoppo should take it...'

'Good on yer, Charlie, don't you do it, mate...'

Charlie saw his mistake, and turning to the class, with flapping gestures quelled the uproar.

'Sorry about that, sir. There's some real tough nuts in this class, sir. But, er, it does seem clear to me, sir, that you should take it, you know, like to the headmaster sort of personally.'

'Yes, yes, Hawkins, you've made your point, if a trifle eloquently. Let's not waste any more time. I'll run it up myself. No fooling around now. I'll be back in a jiff.' He disappeared

through the door, gown flying behind him, bearing in his hands the headmaster's parcel. What he didn't know, and what Peter and the boys did know, was that it contained a large turd, freshly laid by Charlie that morning.

David came home later than usual, looking very serious. Over tea, he broached the subject that Peter was dreading.

'I'm really worried about that young man. I think he has missed his calling.'

'Dad, I don't want to be, er, rude or nothing, but is it *right* for you, you know, to discuss a teacher...?' He was glad to even the score.

David stared at him, anger mounting, until he remembered their previous conversation.

'Oh.' He cleared his throat. 'This, son, is a very different matter. You see, at that time you brought unfounded stories to me about a colleague. Or tried to, but I wouldn't have a bar of that. This isn't the same at all. You see, it's one thing for me to discuss these things with you and your mother in the trust of our home. It's quite another for you to come to me with rumours that you've picked up in the playground. Let's just not get home and school mixed up, eh?' David beamed at Peter, man-to-man.

'Yes, Dad, of course, Dad. Sorry.' Peter wasn't sorry at all. He was angry at his father's duplicity. At least he knew where he stood.