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One

To endure three score and ten years once seemed the greatest possible victory. History is written by its survivors, survival elevated into triumph. Yet now that I near that full measure of my days I have discovered the flaw fatal to this happy scheme of things: longevity alone is not enough. He who captures the minds of the young is in truth the victor. And the young are so impressionable. A generation of new students, perhaps their passage into teachers, another generation of their students, and all that I have lived by will be forgotten. Even my Victor, my son Victor, is a stranger. Quite uninspired by my dreams, my old-fashioned ideas: knowledge for its own sake, virtue its own reward. Young, hard and ambitious, with the capacity for success that I have always lacked. Yet what will he succeed in? The amassing of wealth? The accumulation of power? Nothing of any true worth. His success will be my final failure.

I am old and grey, and it is all I can do to muster my thoughts from far-flung melancholy, from childish rage at my own son's assurance, and press them into duty in pursuit of the interest and attention of the young lad who sits before me. Not to mention of his parents' wallets. 'There can be no fine thoughts, no nice agonies of conscience, until a man has bread in his belly.' Krishna, you old rogue, you always had an answer. Every departure from principle and right conduct could find its necessity in your silver tongue. But you at least I have outlasted.

Perched at the dining table, hands clasped in front of me, I wonder how I look to the boy. He probably sees me as all bones, and indeed my skin is taut across the protruding knuckles. With my head bowed, and my scalp showing beneath my thinning hair, I probably look like a monk to him. I am convinced that I frighten him. Old men always frighten young boys, perhaps for good reason: we are what they must become. And so they fear us, or else despise us; two sides of the same coin. I must wax less philosophical, concentrate on the moment, show him that I am not to be feared. Respected yes, but feared no, or else I risk losing him, this my first pupil in over a year. Is he hard inside, like Victor? They cannot all be like that, not from the beginning. It is education that turns them so. Perhaps I can still reach out to him. After all he's chosen to

study Latin. A boy who wants to study Latin cannot be beyond redemption.

'In two years' time or so you will sit the 'O' Level. That may sound a long time away, but if you want to do well, as I'm sure you do, you must work hard now. Your parents tell me this is the first time you are studying Latin?'

'That's right.'

At least the boy has answered, and in a clear and steady voice. I make eye contact now, looking up at him, over the black frame of my spectacles. Was it always so difficult? Did teaching always feel like this, as if one were a charlatan about to be unmasked: the old pontificating to the young when their own lives have fallen so short? I must halt this querulous speculation. It is not helping.

'That is good. You will have no bad habits to unlearn. But you must want to learn. Latin is like anything else. You struggle at first, you may feel frustration when you can't learn everything at once, but in the end, when you have mastered it, that's your reward. You want to learn?'

'Yes, Mr Isaac.'

'Latin is a wonderful language. Like English, it is the language of conquerors. And like English, it has been the vehicle for the spread of the Gospel.'

The ceiling fan revolves slowly overhead, stirring the air just a little, without any great enthusiasm. This is my fault: I asked for the speed to be reduced, for nothing would make my task harder than having my papers fly hither and thither as I seek to address the boy in a calm, dignified and yet inspiring manner. In front of me a glass of cold water gathers drops of condensation. They swell until gravity sets them trickling down the side of the glass. Thankfully the mother-of-pearl coaster on which it stands has a rim which stops the pool of water from leaking out across the polished rosewood. If not, the Primer that I have opened between us would face a threat from a different element. And as usual my attempts at foresight would be rendered nugatory.

'The Romans won for themselves a great empire. They started out as a band of wanderers, who escaped from the ruins of Troy after that city had been sacked by the Greeks. The story is told in *The Aeneid*, an epic poem by Virgil, which we will study. Part of it, in any event. In the end this band of wanderers settled on the seven hills of Rome, a city no bigger than Singapore.'

The boy is staring at my lips. Either he's impressed, or he's noticed that I forgot, in my rush not to be late for this first lesson, to put in my dentures. Struck by how solemn he looks, and anxious over what his thoughts may be, I almost forget what I am about to say. Somehow, all my years of teaching perhaps, I recover my composure.

'Gradually they subjugated the whole of Italy. Then they fought a number of wars with Carthage, where Hannibal came from. Carthage was in North Africa, and victory over Carthage brought the Romans control over the whole of the Mediterranean Sea. Then they expanded north. The army, commanded by Julius Caesar, conquered Gaul, the name of France in those days. We will read part of his account of these conquests. Even the island of Britain fell to the Romans. Now, boy, why do you think that the Romans were so blessed in their conquests?'

For a moment I think that he's not going to answer, that his thoughts are wholly adrift, and I hesitate between patient repetition and harsh rebuke. Before I come to a decision, he speaks.

'I don't know. Why?'

'For the spread of Christianity. The Roman Empire served God's purpose by establishing a common language for the preaching of God's word. What language was that?'

'Latin, sir.' Good, he is following. Yet I'm still worried about the impression my words may be having. This link between language and religion always worked in the mission school in which I taught, but I am aware how unsophisticated it is to insist on such a connection, especially today, when the young seem so protected, so spoiled, yet somehow so worldly, so confident. Soft in their self-indulgence, yet hard in their lack of illusions and ideals. How can they accept the possibility that God's mysterious ways might be so transparent, so reducible to the logic of evangelism? I am not at all sure that I do.

'Yes, good. Not Hebrew. Not Greek. Latin. Christianity spread to Britain in the language of the Romans. And then, more than a thousand years later, the British Empire brought Christianity to the world. In English. You understand?'

He's nodding. He understands.

'So that is why it is good that you should learn Latin. Open the book now. Yes, chapter one. We will start with the first conjugation of verbs. Do you see that table? You must learn how verbs change their endings depending on their person, tense and mood. Person and tense I'm sure you understand. Mood I will explain another day. It's all very simple really. You have a root, in this case "am", "a", "m" and then you change the endings to make your meaning. "Am-o", I love; "am-as", you, singular, love; "am-at", he, she or it loves; "am-amus", we love; "am-atis", you, plural, love; "am-ant", they love. You must learn in this way. Understand?'

No doubt he does. He's probably convinced that Latin is boring and mechanical, and that I'm a withered old man who will teach him by force of repetition, whether he wants to learn or not. He must regret his decision to

embark on the subject. Or was it his parents? Did they insist? I know how you feel, I want to say, I was young once too, but stop myself just in time. Part of a teacher's advantage is to seem different, to wear the authority of difference. I am here to make you like I am. A man schooled in the ways of the world. Experienced and assured. A stern but loving father whose guidance, where necessary, extends to the rod. But is that the kind of teacher I wanted to be?

My own father, standing over me, yes, with a rod, over Mercy and me, for we were both, in a concerted effort, refusing to eat the rice and curry that Mother had prepared. Father's voice always slowed at such times. Explaining in measured tones how many hours he had to work to put each meal upon the table. How many hours of shuffling paper, dealing patiently with hospital administrators, Englishmen who knew nothing about how the place was kept running, who only knew that they, by dint of their skin colour, commanded the people like my father who were the cogs and wheels of the system. How old was I then? At an age when fear of Father was beginning to change into a desire to emulate him, when love of Mother was transforming into contempt for her weakness, holding Father's arm and crying that he should not beat us. Certainly it was I who took the first mouthful of food. Mercy, her eyes fixed upon me, received the beating.

I am glad when the lesson ends. It's so long since I have taught, tutored, whatever, that at first I hardly knew what to say. Lack of practice, that's all, made me feel an imposter. After a while the old rhythms began to return, the adjustment of pace, form and content in sensitive response to the pupils' mood. Teaching for me was a calling, a desire to guide the young and unformed into knowledge and understanding. Without the rod. The modern world, I believed, must abjure the old ways. The arrogance of those who ruled, keeping their subjects safe and reasonably prosperous, must give way to the democratic participation of all. Colonialism was fading, its shadow diminishing, and young saplings of independence were thrusting into the sunlight. Youth, days of power and possibility. Yet in the end was it not I who was out of step with the world? I, believer in the necessity of freedom, who was fundamentally out of joint with society? Must security and comfort always be preferred to the rigour, the pain, of thinking for oneself? Must we always fear our inner selves too much to allow our outer selves true autonomy? No wonder I could not remain a teacher.