

Kismet

by Gary Kittle

They know, but he tells them anyway.

‘That’s not in the syllabus.’

But they’ve been asking all week.

‘We’re just interested, that’s all.’ Jack’s grin stretches wide across his face. ‘You do want us to be interested in history, don’t you, sir?’

Yes, he thinks. Just not mine.

All eyes are on him now; backs straight, breaths bated. Jack’s twisted lips promise no escape. Answer and they’ll find him out; change the subject and he’ll seal his confession.

‘Sir?’

After all these years, everyone must have guessed. Is he still afraid of losing his job? Clause 28 has sunk without trace, but he’s still treading water.

‘And besides,’ Jack unleashes the coup de grâce, ‘It’s been fifty years. What does it matter?’

‘You’ve lost me, Jack,’ he says, cautiously.

The Summer of Love, and the promise of something better.

‘Like on TV?’ Gemma chips in.

Then he gets it. *Well done, class. I’ll make scholars of you yet.*

‘Gay Britannia, sir.’

He expects a swell of laughter to roll through the class like a Mexican wave, for elbows to nudge and eyes to wink, but there is only this expectant silence. Perhaps it’s time

to let go, to find out which way the tide is really pulling. The temptation circles his mind like a shark's fin.

One moment of weakness, he shudders, and it's over.

But he is so tired: tired of self-censorship in the staffroom; of pretending to his family that's he too overworked to get married; that he hasn't met the right girl yet; that his father's suspicions are groundless.

'OK,' he sighs.

He feels his shoulders lift a good inch.

History is about finding the truth and learning from it, he always tells them.

'The answer to your question is: No. That's not what he said. The original quotation is the correct one.'

“Kiss me, Hardy”?’

'According to at least three people who were there, yes.'

'Was one of them you, then, sir?' Jack smirks.

He allows himself a tentative smile. Jack is just taking the piss, not trying to push him under.

'This was in 1805. How old do you think I am?'

'As old as you feel, sir?'

A guffaw erupts from between his lips – too loud, he realises.

Between the waves there are troughs ready to swallow him.

'So what is this “kismet”, anyway?' Gemma asks.

'It means fate or destiny. Fate being defined as the power to predetermine a course of events, based on the belief that a natural order predominates in the universe.'

'No shit?' says Jack.

But he wasn't talking to them. His watering eyes can't focus anymore.

'Hadn't he just been shot, though?' Sam joins in.

'I am a dead man, Hardy.'

'So he could have meant fate, couldn't he?'

'I am going fast.'

'Sir?'

'It will all be over with me soon.'

A ship in harbour; safe but seaworthy.

Please.

'Sir?'

Let go.

He blinks his eyes to the natural order, two centuries on.

Let go now.

'No, Sam,' he declares. 'Kismet was not a word used in England until 1830. He couldn't have said it.'

'But I don't get it, sir.'

Yes, you do.

'Unless...'

A moment of weakness. And not waving or drowning.

'He was a national hero. They didn't want people to think he was gay.'

There, the words have left his mouth before anyone else can say them. They are his words; owned, merited. He won't be drowned out. Not today.

'But hadn't he just won us the Battle of Waterloo?'

Waterloo: this fated struggle.

'No, Jack. It was Trafalgar.'

Gemma's eyes are shining. 'What were they doing fighting in London?'

He raises his eyebrows at the unrelenting verve of teenage wit. 'It's off the coast of Spain, Gemma.'

'Club Eighteen-Hundreds, sir?' chortles Jack.

And suddenly the laughter pours out of him, his spirit bobbing like a cork.

'What, sir? What?'

'It's just that...'

Through habit alone, he struggles to hide what the world must never see. But his limbs ache, his head rings. And he imagines his father, treading water beyond the next wave, as tired and lost as his son. The tide would carry them in or out together, surely? Either way, it'll be a blessing to them both, this letting go. No man is an island, however submerged.

'It wasn't seen that way back then.'

'You mean men kissing each other?' Nathan says it like a taunt. There'll always be one.

Yes, I mean men kissing each other. 'Exactly.'

'Like the French do, sir?'

'Yeah,' laughs Jack. 'And it was the bloody French that shot him.'

He frowns, but can't stop smiling.

'Jack's right, sir,' Gemma declares, solemnly. 'It doesn't matter. Not anymore.'

There's a deep tranquillity, like the breathless silence that precedes the return of a trade wind to the mainsail. The moment passes and Jack lets a new gag tug at the corners of his mouth. 'Even if he stuck his tongue down Hardy's throat!'

The laughter is surely loud enough to be heard in the neighbouring classes. They'll want to know about that in the staffroom. But this time he won't have to keep it a secret.

'Now,' he says, seriously. 'I think we should get back to the formation of the United Nations in 1945. Yes?'

They groan, but it's half-hearted. They respect him, he knows, because he's a good teacher, and good teachers are never afraid to stray outside the curriculum.

'One last question, sir,' pleads Gemma.

If it had been Nathan he would have refused. 'Go on, then.'

'Were those his dying words?'

“Kiss me, Hardy?”

He surveys the class and remembers with pride what drew him into teaching.

'No, Gemma.'

He feels his toes sink into wet sand, feels the mid-afternoon sunshine warm his weary body. And with salt-stung eyes, he realises that some seas don't drown you, they lift you up.

'Sir?'

In a ship called *Victory*.

'He said, "Thank God I have done my duty".'