

The Governors' Visit

It is a truth universally acknowledged – well, in the small universe that is St Hugh's – that a parent willing to part with thirty thousand pounds a year in school fees must never find out what really goes on behind the closed doors of our illustrious seat of learning.

Mr Soul, our headmaster, is a distant figure, emerging from his office from time to time to smile, rub his hands together and say 'marvellous, marvellous; jolly good show' before disappearing again to hide behind his desk and dream up yet more impractical schemes. He is guarded by his ferocious PA Barbara, who has the deep, throaty rasp of a chain smoker, and legs that never fail to remind me of a drag queen.

Enter Julian Frost, deputy head; ambitious and oily, with a smile that Little Red Riding Hood would have recognised immediately. He is aided and abetted by the unpalatable and unscrupulous Sandra Pilsworth. Her job as a PE teacher has given her the muscular thighs necessary to climb the greasy pole to the dizzying heights of deputy head's paramour, although not yet – to her chagrin – deputy head's third wife.

And who am I? Kate Fincham, teacher of English and drama, observer of life and recorder of minutiae.

And why do I feel the need to record the inconsequential goings-on at a very insignificant Public School? Well, the Bard tells us that all the world's a stage, so you could say that I see myself as a sort of playwright, an *amateur* of the human condition, exploring universal truths in my little corner of rural England.

I always think that being in prison must be a bit like working in a boarding school. You're thrown together with people you wouldn't otherwise choose to spend time with, and you have to make the best of it. We gossip, we take sides, we connive and contrive, and our

little world consumes us entirely. There's a great deal of jockeying for position, and nobody is more skilled at this than Julian – he is the de facto head of the Jockeying Club – and so consequently, there is nothing we like more than seeing him take a tumble. Two weeks ago we watched him at full gallop heading towards Becher's Brook, and we held our breath and prayed for disaster.

Everyone thought it slightly odd that the headmaster had decided to absent himself from the annual governors' bash by accepting an invitation to speak at a conference in far-off Manchester. Agreed, it must be a trial to have to be pleasant to Sir Digby Wallaby-Sprockett for a whole day, but then he is paid to do that sort of thing. Plus of course, Julian *let-me-try-the-slipper-on-I'm-sure-it's-my-size* Frost is always panting to step up and assume the mantle of responsibility, and should be slapped down at every possible opportunity. But, it was a fait accompli by the time we found out that this year the Governors' Annual Visit would include a formal dinner in the Remembrance Hall and that this formal dinner would be hosted by Julian and his concubine, Self-Satisfied Sandra.

'... and I know you will all do your best, and support Julian in this ambitious new venture, which involves a huge amount of work on his part, with the sole aim of showing the Governors the very best that St Hugh's has to offer,' Mr Soul finished up. I'm never too sure whether he believes what he says, or whether it's all an elaborate joke at our expense.

'So what do you think? Will Salacious Sandra decide that Sir Digby's a better bet than Julian, and stick her hand down his trousers as the port's being served?' Viv can be slightly too earthy for my taste at times, but we share the same fundamental opinions on the members of staff at St Hugh's.

I considered carefully. 'I think that's rather risky. If Sir Digby has a fondness for shot-putter's thighs – and we don't know that he does - she's home and dry, but otherwise she may burn her bridges and she's far too canny for that. I think she's more likely to tell old

Diggers what an excellent leader Julian is, and how much better it would be if he was headmaster.'

'Over my dead body,' snorted Viv. 'Got to put the kibosh on that little scheme. Any ideas?'

'Oh, just give me time,' I said. If there's one thing I pride myself on, it's being a creative, ideas person. Viv's a scientist –practical, good at following instructions, but very little imagination.

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From where I was sitting in the Deputy Head's chair on the dais, I could see that Bloody Fincham woman looking at me as HM made his announcement.

'... with the sole aim of showing the Governors the very best that St Hugh's has to offer.'

Good God, if her eyebrows had gone any higher they'd have got tangled in that nasty pubic mess she calls a hairstyle. What's the matter with the silly tart? She'd be quite attractive if she wasn't so disapproving and spinsterish. Not that I care - plenty of other fish in the waters around here ... younger and more succulent fish. But not at the moment. Right now I need to keep Sandra on board to deliver my exquisitely planned coup d'état. I want it, but she's gagging for it. Headmaster's totty, sitting on my right hand at all official engagements – not a bad promotion for a PE teacher with legs like tree trunks.

'Headmaster, there's been a terrible oversight!' I smiled as I remembered how I'd rushed into his office, distress oozing from every pore. 'The Governors' visit's been missed off the calendar, and when I tried to add it a moment ago, I noticed that it clashes with your Headmasters of England conference.'

The credulous imbecile just looked at me and shook his head. 'I can't possibly pull out of the conference, Julian. I rely on you to hold the fort in my absence.'

'Thank you, Headmaster,' I said. 'I won't let you down.' And I certainly won't. I'll drop you, and then stamp on you, just to make sure you don't get up again.

The dinner idea came from Sandra, to be fair.

'Alcohol makes people so much more open to persuasion,' she said. 'We'll have a really good dinner, raid the school wine cellars, dress to impress and I'm sure we can persuade Sir Digby to see things from our point of view.'

'Bing-bang, partner,' I said. 'You butter Sir Digby up ...'

'... and you take the headmaster to the cleaners,' she finished.

We smiled at each other. She's not a bad girl, old Sandra. Pity about the legs.

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Viv and I took to scanning the noticeboards every time we walked past. There was no shortage of information about the bunfight – dress code, menu, wine list and then, finally, the seating plan. I was reading it avidly when Sandra the Slapper walked past.

'I think you're on table eight,' she said. 'The rather draughty one by the fire exit. Which governor have you got on your table? Oh yes, the one in charge of recycling bins.' She smiled with all the warmth of a cryogenic specimen. 'We're looking after Sir Digby, of course. Julian wants me to make sure he has a memorable evening.'

I looked at her - hair scraped back in a stubby, shaving-brush ponytail; red, shiny face from all that fresh air; short maroon netball skirt - and wondered if Sir Digby's idea of a memorable evening involved a forty-five-year-old woman dressed as a schoolgirl.

I sped off to the labs to find Viv.

'I knew it! Salacious Sandra's been told to give Diggers the night of his life and we need to make sure she doesn't, my little scientific sidekick.'

'What's the plan then?' That's what I like about Viv; she always recognises my superiority when it comes to plotting.

'Simple!' I said. 'All we have to do is stop Sandra going to the dinner.'

'How?' Viv's bluntness can be a little trying at times.

'Well,' I began. 'We can't just tell her it's cancelled, obviously. I think it needs to be a physical impediment of some sort.'

'What – lock her out, you mean?'

I sighed. 'Subtlety, Viv, subtlety. If she started pounding on the door, Sir Digby'd wonder what the hell was going on ... unless he was stone deaf, of course – which he isn't.'

'So, sock the subtle impediment to me then,' Viv grinned.

'Laxatives!' I said. 'You know those extra-strong prescription ones that Rosie P had when she was all bunged up after her cyst op? Well, there are still half a dozen left in the medical cabinet in matron's room – or at least there were, until I appropriated them this morning.'

'Right ...' Viv looked unsure. 'But how are you going to persuade her to take six heavy-duty laxatives?'

'This is the genius bit,' I said. 'You know those peanut butter brownies she went mad for at the cake sale? Well, you're going to make a batch and hand them out at break. A special treat for everyone on Julian's big day.'

'Me? Why me?' she asked.

'Well, obviously if I offer her a home-made cake she'll immediately smell a large, laxative-scented rat. But you're a different matter – you did win the staff bake-off after all.'

'And how do we make sure she gets the right one?' Viv was coming around; I knew she would.

'Easy! All you do is make a separate one for her, mark it subtly and then hand out individual cakes on napkins to everyone. That way you make sure she gets the dose.'

Viv smiled. 'I love it! She misses her chance to schmooze Diggers and ...' she paused dramatically, '... spends the evening with the worst shits of her life!' As I mentioned before, Viv does lack a certain *je ne sais quoi*.

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Game on, I thought. This was going to be my show. Headline act – Julian Frost, headmaster-in-waiting, helped by his glamorous assistant, Sandra. Told her to wear that tight blue dress - makes her tits stick out. God, I hoped Digby was a tit-man, and not a leg-man.

I walked into the Common Room and saw Viv Simpson parading around in a frilly apron and cap. Christ! The staff at this place won't know what's hit them when I'm in charge.

'Julian! Come and have a cake – I've made them specially for your big day,' she called. Perhaps she's not so bad after all.

Then I saw Sandra about to take a bite out of an enormous brownie.

'Hey, Miss Piggy!' I said. 'You don't want to split your dress tonight.'

She didn't look very pleased.

'I'm only having one,' she said.

'Better safe than sorry,' I told her. 'Let's just have water jugs on the table tonight, not your jugs as well.'

Thought that was quite funny, but she glared at me – miserable cow, so I grabbed her cake and took a big bite.

'I'll have this piece,' I said to Viv. 'And save Sandra from potential embarrassment later.'

Sandra lunged towards the cake, so I crammed the whole thing into my mouth. Viv looked horrified – don't know what her problem is. 'Lob it, gob on it, snarf it, or barf it' we always say at rugby dinner, so I snarfed it.

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My drama group froze as the classroom door flew open. Viv gestured frantically to me to come outside.

'It's a bloody disaster, Julian ate the brownie!' she gasped.

I stared at her. Keep calm, Kate, I thought. You're the brains here, think of something.

'How long till it takes effect?' I asked.

'God knows. About half an hour for one tablet. But for six ...' She shrugged. 'He ate them about twenty minutes ago. I had to stay there, handing out cakes and pretending everything was fine, until they'd all gone.'

Suddenly there was a roar, followed by a scream and several thuds. We dashed down the corridor and round the corner to see Sandra, lying at the foot of the stairs.

'He pushed me. He pushed me,' she whimpered.

'He didn't exactly push her.' Ferocious Barbara seemed to have witnessed the accident. 'He was racing down the stairs like a madman, and barged into her. He didn't even stop when she screamed.'

'Who didn't stop?' I asked, although I had a horrible feeling that I already knew the answer.

'Julian,' she said.

I started to feel sick as I walked back to my class. I'm going to be sacked, I thought. They'll trace it back to the cake, and I'll have to own up. I can't expect Viv to take the rap. God, why do I have to be so bloody imaginative?

Viv and I took a glass of fizz from the tray and sidled towards the corner where Julian and Sandra were monopolising Sir Digby. Sandra was resplendent in a low-cut evening dress and

a very large surgical collar, which made her look like a cross-dressing stormtrooper on a night out in the Galactic Empire.

‘... just feeling a bit nauseous,’ Julian was saying. ‘Don’t think the Imodium agreed with me.’

‘You do look rather pale,’ Sir Digby agreed, looking anxious, as though Julian might at any moment vomit copiously all over him. ‘And you’ve been in the wars, my dear.’

He patted Sandra solicitously on the hand, but his eyes were riveted to her breasts; impossibly squeezed between her push-up bra and the neck brace, they looked like a couple of burger buns poking out of the top of her dress.

‘I’m absolutely fine, Sir Digby,’ she said, turning her whole body awkwardly to face him as she spoke. ‘I’ve got these wonderful painkillers – I really don’t feel a thing.’ She grabbed a glass of prosecco from a passing waiter as she spoke.

‘Now, now, my sweet,’ Julian took the glass. ‘No alcohol with those pills, you know what the doctor said.’

She swivelled to face Julian and narrowed her eyes, giving him a look that would have made a black mamba recoil.

‘Just one will be fine,’ she said airily, and snatched the glass back.

‘Oh no, it won’t!’ Viv muttered to me.

By the time the pudding was served it was clear that Julian was not well. He was pale green and sat mopping his face with his napkin. Sandra, on the other hand, had several empty glasses in front of her, and was leaning towards Sir Digby laughing and stroking his arm. Suddenly she belched loudly and wetly. Sir D looked rather taken aback, and Julian retched and hurried from the room.

We all stopped talking and looked at the top table. Sandra staggered stiffly to her feet, hampered by the alcohol and the neck brace.

'I'd like to ask y'all,' she slurred. 'Well, not Julian, he's gone - sicky-wicky, I think.' She giggled, then stopped and raised her glass. 'Let's all have a little drinky to Sir Wigby.'

She raised her glass, leant backwards to pour the contents into her mouth and lost her balance. We watched in silence as she fell back onto her chair and then slowly toppled sideways and disappeared from view. Sir Digby now sat in isolation at the top table, looking as though he'd found himself in a lunatic asylum and was hoping it was all a ghastly mistake.

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Christ, what a nightmare! Not only did I lose about twenty percent of my entire body mass through various orifices yesterday, on top of that Sandra made a complete tit of herself in front of the whole bloody board of governors. She's history - the woman's a total liability. Luckily I felt a bit better this morning, so quick-thinking Frost was back in action and I decided I'd catch HM on his way into school and do a bit of damage limitation. But then I saw him with that bitch Fincham yapping away in his ear – too late! He came up to me smiling, and shook my hand.

'Well done, Julian,' he said. 'Knew I could count on you. Sir Digby rang me first thing today and said how much the governors appreciate the way I run the school – then he mentioned something about loose cannons and recipes for disaster – didn't quite follow that bit. Anyway, the upshot is that he wants to renew my contract for another five years.'

2,750 words

