

FACETAKER

I fed the coins in the slot – two pounds, a fifty – and waited. Clunk. One of the pounds clattered down into the Return slot. I licked it and pushed it back in. A click, like pinball, and the green light in the screen went red. Now. What should I do with the blood? I dabbed the single drop of it between the eyes of my reflection, like an Indian caste mark, and sat upright, my eyes on the line.

There was a pause, like firing squad victims must register, only they never get to tell you, do they? Flash. As I blinked, a green after-image shivered behind my eyes, then there was the red light again. Should I smile? Flash.

Before the third flash I thought: what if that's where Denzil dabbed his blood, in the very same spot? Flash. Did that make us blood brothers? Flash, it went again.

Facetaker

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pd

Prologue

There's always one somewhere, in the corner of the precinct, on the station forecourt, anywhere that crowds pass by. Waiting. Day and night it stands there, glowing with a white light from inside. There's nothing to it, really – just an upright chrome and plastic box, with a camera in it in a place you can't quite see. There are larger-than-life pictures on the outside – square-jawed men, cute kids and winsome women – as if, for just £2.50 in the slot, that could be you. There is a small grey curtain you twitch across to hide you, like a confessional in a Catholic church. People go in there looking serious and anxious like that, too.

It's not tall enough to stand up in. Watch a grown man and you'll see him squirm in sideways, stooping. First, he'll have glanced a moment in the little mirror, pretending to be casual so he won't look vain. You'll hear the rattling sound as he winds down the seat, and you'll see his knees and feet beneath the curtain, shuffling as he adjusts

himself, pats his hair, straightens his tie. Then he'll be strangely still, as if he's frozen in time; then there's a blue-white flicker. Lightning. He comes out, sheepish, glancing at the slot where the photos will drop. If you're waiting for your turn, he won't look you in the eye.

Day and night it waits there, glowing. People come at all hours. No one likes the pictures that it shows them, but they come — somehow they have to — all the same.

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Denzil's Game

I'm trying to think when it was, the first time —the first time I noticed that Denzil had that special thing about him. You could call it power. Things would happen round him like they did round no-one else. At the time it seemed exciting; it set my nerve ends on edge. It's only afterwards, looking back, that I realize the feeling was fear.

We were friends, after all. And the first time I'm thinking of, it wasn't me he was frightening; it was Mr Pinkus. I was a bystander, one of the class, though I caught on to what was happening quicker than most of the rest. He was subtle, Denzil was. You've got to grant him that.

And Mr Pinkus? If ever there was a natural victim, he was. You could see it in his eyes. The moment he stepped through the door, before most of the class had even noticed him, he looked cornered. It wasn't that we were out of order, just a bit high, the

way you are when you know the English teacher's off – a teacher that nobody likes – and it's Shakespeare again. We were chatting and pushing each other about a bit and joking, and then the door opened. There was Mr Pinkus looking ... well, I've got to say it: pink.

It was his skin: it had that slightly boiled look. He blinked too, several times, as he looked around the classroom. You could see the pinkness of his scalp right through his thin white hair.

“Hello, sir.” It was Denzil who spoke first, and it seemed polite – just a bit too polite to be true, but he smiled as he said it, and Mr Pinkus looked relieved and gave a bit of a smile in return.

“Uh, I understand Miss Stokes has set you work to get on with,” he said.

Someone muttered something at the back, and Mr Pinkus jerked round. “Pardon?” he said and blushed. That's what gave Denzil his cue. Mr Pinkus's hearing wasn't too good these days; he missed things, and felt bad about it. He was a couple of years from retirement and you could see the younger members of staff thinking that the time couldn't pass too quickly.

“Ben said: *Yes she did, but she didn't explain it, sir.*” Denzil spoke loud and clear, and Mr Pinkus's eyes were drawn to him.

What a helpful boy, you could see him thinking. Looking back now, there was something just then in the way that Denzil nodded slightly as he smiled...

“Could you explain it to us, sir?”

“Oh...” Mr Pinkus said. “It’s not my subject...” Mr Pinkus was Religious Studies. My mum told me later that he’d been a vicar once, but found it stressful so he turned to teaching. Little did he know.

“Please, sir?” said Denzil. I looked at the worksheet we’d been left. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. “What is the dramatic effect”, it said, “of Oberon telling Puck to make Titania fall in love with Bottom?” At the back of the class, some people shifted restlessly. For clarity, the question scored about two out of ten. It was the kind of question we could leave till Miss Stokes came back next week, then tell her we hadn’t been able to do it because we didn’t understand. If Pinkus went and explained now, we’d have to do it.

“Shut up, Denzil,” whispered Lisa. Lisa was queen bee in our class, the one at the centre of the biggest group of friends, and what Lisa said went. Denzil was new, and in nobody’s gang, but he gave her a straight look, not aggressive, just sort of calm and controlled. *I know what I’m doing*, it said. And – this is what I mean by *power* – Lisa let it go.

“Uh... ‘What is the dramatic effect...’” Mr Pinkus started reading. Jase in the back row sniggered when he got to “Bottom”. There was a moment when the others could have started too, but Denzil cut in right away.

“Do you think she means,” he said, “What-is-the-effect-on-Puck-of-Oberon-telling-him-to-do-it, or does she mean it’s-worse-for-Titania-because-Oberon-told-Puck-to-do-it-instead-of-doing-it-himself, or...?”

“Slow down,” said Mr Pinkus. “That sounds like an intelligent question. I think you should all take notice...”

So Denzil went on. He looked serious. At first people fidgeted but one by one they fell quiet, as even the slowest ones got the message from the way Denzil was speaking. Loud. And. Clear. *E-nunc-i-at-ing* perfectly for Mr P... Something was going on. It was a performance of some kind and everyone from Lisa to Jase tuned in to listen, wondering what it would be.

Denzil was clever, you sensed it, though in the months he’d been there he hadn’t let on much. He’d come from a school where they were big on Drama, and he seemed to be talking sense, using words like “dramatic irony”. It was sort of touching to watch Mr Pinkus leaning forward, smiling, being

grateful to Denzil for not showing up the fact that he hadn't read the play for forty years. Then Pinkus was leaning forward just a little further, and a little further, frowning so the skin between his eyebrows furrowed. And I realized that Denzil's voice was getting, very slowly, quieter...

I've got to say one thing: no one hated Mr Pinkus. He was a harmless sort of man, mild, quite nice even, on a good day. He might have been good as a vicar. He looked in some sort of pain now, as Denzil took the volume down and down, keeping his eyes on Pinkus' all the time. And just as the man was about to say "I'm sorry, I can't hear you," suddenly Denzil took the volume up again.

"Is that right, sir?" said Denzil, very clearly, and stopped.

Mr P looked round, flustered. "Uh, would anyone else care to comment?" he said. No one met his eyes, but Lisa twiggged. Her hand went up.

"Please sir," she said distinctly, and began. I forget what she said – she wasn't as good at it as Denzil – but in a minute or two she caught Denzil's eye, he nodded, and she started slowly fading, until she was mouthing as if she was talking loudly but someone had their finger on the volume and... Mr Pinkus looked rattled. He sat

down, awkwardly. Under the pinkness, he was going pale.

I know what you'll say, if you're kind. You'll say: don't blame yourselves for what happened next. You can't expect fifteen-year-old kids to understand how a man in late middle age, just on the brink of old, feels when he knows he's losing it. Just a couple of years to hold out for his pension, and he's wondering if he can make it. You can't expect kids like us to guess that he's been bluffing for years, trying to hold on to his dignity, but there are nights he wakes up sweating. Of course you can't... except that somehow Denzil knew. He had an instinct for it. He saw people's soft spots as if they had targets painted on them. I think that was what happened in that moment when he nodded as he smiled.

Denzil took over from Lisa. He was the star. We'd seen him in Drama and we knew that he could improvise. Maybe that's all he ever did, really. Miss Stokes had lost her cool once when she gave him a script and, in the middle of page three, the rest of the cast realized they couldn't find any of the words he was speaking. "So you think you can improve on Shakespeare?" she said, in her lemon-sucking voice.

"That's what we always did at Darkington," Denzil said. "It's called Creative Response."

Darkington was this alternative school he'd been at, all performing arts and self expression, before he landed back here in the suburbs when his parents split. If you believed the stories, Darkington was a school where the kids voted on who'd take assembly that morning, and what religion it would be.

“Well, you're not at Darkington now,” Miss Stokes had said, curdly, and Denzil had nodded meekly and read on, word perfect but somehow in a tone of voice that made every line mean the opposite of what it said.

So Denzil could improvise. And Mr Pinkus? He was hooked. Outside, across the car park, in the main road, there were roadworks going on. Every now and then a pneumatic drill would start up, and that's where Denzil's skill showed. Each time the background noise went up, he upped the volume; when it stopped, he eased it back. If there'd been birds out there, I can't help feeling they'd have got the drift and joined in too. That's how it was, with Denzil.

Mr Pinkus was twitchy now, and his forehead was glossy with sweat. Every now and then he put his hand to his ear. His eyes were sort of jerky, looking back and forth for clues or help. “I ... I'm sorry...” he started once, but we ignored him. Then the *coup de grâce*...

Outside, the drill stopped suddenly, and the whine of the compressor cut out too. At that second, Denzil glanced round like a conductor, and we were all putting our hands up, mouthing as if we were calling out, but silent. Mr Pinkus staggered to his feet, with both hands to his ears, and stumbled backwards. His chair tipped back and for an instant it hung there, and I really thought that time and sound had stopped, then crash... And with immaculate timing, Denzil and a few others were on their feet, at full volume again, calling "Sir? Are you all right, sir?"

Mr Pinkus did not answer, he just turned and bolted.

There was a hush, and we looked at each other. Outside in the corridor, quietly at first, someone was sobbing. It started as a high-pitched whimper, like a child. "Someone go and look," said Lisa, after a while. I was nearest the door.

I wished I hadn't. Mr Pinkus had his face in his hands as if it had come loose and he had to hold it on. As I peered from the doorway he looked up and saw me, and he groaned. He blundered off down "the corridor, crying as he ran.

It was ten minutes before the head came in, and she looked rattled too. We braced ourselves for a bollocking but it never came.

“Mr Pinkus...” she said in a grave voice, “has been taken ill. Rather upsettingly ill...”

There was a pause. She looked at Lisa. “He just ran out, Miss,” said Lisa, big-eyed. “Will he be all right?”

“I hope so,” said the head. “He’s just been ... under a lot of stress, that’s all.” By the end of the day, though, “breakdown” was the word everybody was using. There’d been an ambulance at Reception and all of Year Seven, on the ground floor, had stories of how they’d heard someone shouting and sobbing in the corridor. A few of them went home quite upset, and next morning in assembly the head had to do a whole thing about mental health problems and how they can strike anyone at any time. “I think we should all remember,” she wound up, “what a good and kind man Mr Pinkus was, and hope he can be back with us soon.” But we all noticed that she said was. Several of us glanced at each other sideways, and especially at Denzil, but he didn’t glance back. To any outsider, he’d have looked like a good boy, listening. A lot of the time, in class, he’d have a slightly bored look some teachers found annoying. Right now, I couldn’t see any expression on his face at all.

Maybe that was it: the first time that he frightened me. If there’d been a flicker of anything – he didn’t have to be ashamed or

guilty, just embarrassed would have done – he'd have been just like the rest of us, thinking what a smart game it had been, pushing the man to the edge, until he was over. You never know, do you, how close that edge is? Then it's too late.

I should have hated Denzil. It was true: Mr Pinkus was a kind man, really. In the wrong place at the wrong time, isn't that what they say? He'd been defenceless, that was all. I should have hated Denzil for it, but I didn't. I felt my heart beating faster. It was like football, when you watch the other side's striker slip through your defence so smoothly and skilfully, not a sign of effort, that when the ball smacks home you've got to cheer. Just for the style of it. Denzil had style. Whatever else you say about him - and everyone thinks they've got something to say about him these days – you've got to admit he had style.

And let's be honest, we forgot about Pinkus in a week or two. That's the sad bit, and a kind of warning too. If I'd really thought about it then, maybe all the things that happened later wouldn't have. You never know how close anyone is to the edge, as I said. Least of all your friends and you.

That's all easily said. You must remember: he had style. And for people like me, who do the right things and work hard and no one

looks at them twice, that counts for so much. Besides, Denzil never *made* anyone do anything. Whatever happened, I guess we must have wanted it to.