

GCSE English Language

Paper 1

This extract is from the opening of a short story called 'The School Days of Ivy Robinson'. At this point in the story, Ivy has just got back in touch with an old school friend, and is remembering when their friendship began.

Steam from the engine swirled up at the windows, Ivy watched in relief as the curls of billowing white cloud swirled and cascaded in waterfalls and flurries against the pane of glass. The hypnotic pattern of churning white and grey encased the carriage for quite some time, before the locomotive pushed its way out of the station, its machinery churning and clunking in a cacophony of mechanical musical discord, but even that jarring sound couldn't stop Ivy from smiling. She pulled her worn gloves by their finger tips and carefully tugged them from her chilblain ridden hands, flinching lest the fabric rubbed abrasively over the tender raised skin. Self consciously she pulled her shawl across her lap as a screen from prying eyes, tucking her hands beneath the soft fabric.

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Ivy's chest ached from the long coughing fit she had suffered last night, but now it was the aching that caused her to cough. This perverse misfortune struck Ivy as rather cruel, and she bitterly reflected upon the cause of her illness: she had been working for the Smyth family for only a fortnight before their cook fell sick- and then Ivy herself fell ill just two days after that. So followed a dreadful month of wakeful nights and strong medicine, and then her physician prescribed a month of sea air in Broadstairs.

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Convalescing in Kent had not been without its trials; Ivy had been unable to find any companion to provide her with stimulating conversation for the entire period of her recuperation. Instead, she had sewed, and read a few paperbacks, and attempted the Times crossword with the same kind of half hearted vigour a person might put into re-lacing their winter boots. Time became a solid thing, a thing that pressed against her, as if she were a tiny cog in a great machine with a thousand other cogs around her turning and pushing and winding; her voice became monotone, her movements rigid and stiff. Her mind was ceasing up, as if molten steel was being poured over her brain. It was only when Ivy's eye caught sight of a familiar face smiling irreverently in the background of a photograph in the society pages, that Ivy's trip to seaside begun to improve.

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The smile belonged to a school friend, and this school friend had not been in Ivy's mind since they had parted ways some four years before- when they had both been in the upper school at Hartly Grove Seniors. Having recognised her visage, Ivy had sent a letter to her by way of the paper, and, voila: a friendship restored. In the past week a flurry of letters had been exchanged between them. In school, Kathleen was a small Irish girl with flashing grey eyes, a sharp tongue, and a fiery temper. Kathleen had a great love of lavender and violet perfume, and a laugh that came out as a cackle. Back then, Ivy had considered her like one might think of a wild animal: great admiration, but greater caution.

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When they had been just freshly faced first years, Ivy had been caught in the middle of one of Kathleen's great bursts of temper. Their French mistress, Madame Durand, had accused Ivy of cheating in an examination. Flushing a bright scarlet just at the memory, Ivy recalled how her voice seemed to vanish into her chest, and her words felt tinny and weak, lost in the echoes of the cavernous walls of the classroom. Madam Durand stood above her desk, one hand jabbing at Ivy's copy book, and the other flung in the air, her voice dripping with scorn and disbelief.

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"Ow iz it, all year you write leettle, puny ess-says fur me, an' den sud-den-ly, poof, you are French?" she sneered.

"I, I, I," she stammered, unable to find the words she needed to protest her innocence.

"Oui, oui, oui? Sil vous plait, Miss I-vee," Madame Durand rooted herself in front of the desk, arms branching across either side of the small girl, her face lowered so their noses were almost touching.

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"Aw, she ain't a cheat, Miss," Kathleen's voice carried clearly from the back row of the classroom. The memory had been seared onto her brain: Ivy remembers the narrowing of the furious French teacher's eyes, the widening of her nostrils, and the tightening of the muscles in her jaw, as the Frenchwoman's whole body straightened and turned towards the sound of insolence. The impertinence. The belligerence.

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"She didn't cheat, an's you knows it. We knows it. She knows it," at this Kathleen pointed at Ivy, who was blinking in disbelief at this bizarre turn of events. Madame Durand opened her mouth to speak, and then seemed to think better of it. Kathleen arched an eyebrow, and tilted her head, that mischievous smile of hers curled up the edges of her lips. Between them rushed a shared memory of something that was loudly unspoken. Neither moved for a second, and then-

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"Come on now, Miss, yous knows she ain't," Kathleen spoke as if she was addressing a fellow schoolgirl in long socks out in the yard. The other girls sat behind their desks, entirely convinced that Kathleen had lost her mind.

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Madame Durand did not shout, she did not throw a book, she did not stomp and curse and gesticulate at Kathleen. She didn't do anything. She simply stood, stunned with her mouth open like a gaping idiot...and then she turned and swept out of the room. The girls turned to each other, their faces bewildered, and far too frightened to speak. Was she reporting Kathleen to the headmistress? Was she sending Joe, the caretaker's son to fetch Kathleen's father from the ship yard? Was she looking for a better implement to beat the girls with than the cane that was mounted on the wall behind her desk? The class sat there, as if their feet were made of lead, unmoving and stupefied, until the bell rung for end of day. Trembling with anticipation and uncertainty, the girls looked from one to the other until one brave girl gingerly pushed her chair back and stood up...and then the rest followed her lead. Ivy and Kathleen left last, small smiles exchanged between them, and a firm friendship cemented.

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The train shifted tracks, and the steam puffed heavily, clouds circling the carriage again. Ivy fingered the latest envelope in their correspondence, and a warm smile grew as she looked at the familiar loops of her handwriting; and the faint smell of lavender and violets conjured up that wicked smile, and a pair of flashing, grey, fearless eyes.