

If people ask, 'When you die, does your life flash past?', say yes: in brief illuminations.

I lie by the roadside near my flat, aged 82, victim of a hit-and-run. But here I am, Jean Smith, teacher of some French, more Spanish and later Russian, free-wheeling down the hill, pedalling up the hill to the school, no easy ride. Either way. My Morris Minor only arrives in 1960. No jeans then. Or trews. I'm in my blue and maroon check tweed costume, blouse, brooch, brogues; paniers bursting with exercise books. I'm devoted. My passions are for languages, for international understanding. World socialism.

Oh, it's Iain! Watson. Tall, fair, explosive. We met at university: Edinburgh. Hispanists, communists. Both too shy for sex. Oh, how I wished! ... We channel it into Spanish poetry, pamphlets and propaganda. He goes to fight in Spain: I send food parcels, campaign, watch from afar, even when he falls, by a dry Castilian river-bed. Did he read my letter, from my first job? 'I AM a teacher! My methods, dear Dr Watson (as you WILL be!) are open – total immersion in all things Spanish, but I'm strict in application. Calvinist. Thou shalt not speak English! My girls sing our Republican songs.' Did I send love? Oh, Ms Brodie of the Left.

My first class at Minchenden. Mixed grammar where, from the war on, I'll spend the rest of my teaching days. North London, leafy, suburban. The Head, a scholarly Quaker. *Buenos dias, muchachos y muchachas. Yo soy la Senorita Smith. Abre la ventana* - and a bold boy finally opens the window. They make name cards; Tony becomes Antonio, Janet Juana, Alison Alicia. She and her older brother Ralph both get into Oxford with Spanish; he serves in our Madrid Embassy; she, before becoming an actress, presents a Spanish TV programme. I'm proud. Ralph is brilliant but rebellious. We cross swords – he looming over me, I frowning up. My sister peers at the school photo: 'But he's the spit of your Iain!'

Now look! I'm lowering the needle onto a record. It's *Podmoscovnyye Vechera* – 'Moscow Nights'. I've learnt Russian in a summer, and now I'll get my sixth form through O-level in a year. One girl tells me, decades on, that she can still sing it. My methods, Dr Watson? Parents suspect I'm a Soviet spy, but my local Labour party hardly threatens in Tory North 14, and anyway, they like my strictness.

The staff room door opens, a billow of choking blue haze. I am not a smoker, never join the Friday-night drinkers. But I admire colleagues: imposing Dr Walter himself, Miss Kirkpatrick, with her easy humour and tall elegance, younger Miss Redman, of African and Jewish descent, who puts our pupils right on Race and Empire. I accompany foreign exchange trips, invite sixth formers to *tortilla* at my flat, where they shyly praise my cross-stitched cushions. I still play a stylish game in the staff-versus-prefects hockey, thick stockings under my divided skirt. At the leaving party I've tried to avoid, I receive sherry glasses and bottles of good *Jerez*. I am touched.

I retire. I've saved. But see me now, in a new but dusty lawyer's office on the exploding Costa Brava, hearing I've been swindled over a house I'd hoped to buy. But oh, how I'd have stuck out amongst the expats: insisting on speaking Spanish, brandishing 'The Guardian', refusing beery revels! Eccentric, hardly lovable. I turn inland, take trips with my sister, glorying in the golden cities, the endless plains, the dry forbidding sierras. I see where he fell ... In my mind's eye. 'Look, I ain my love, I have fallen too!'

And I die.

Jean Smith, 1912 - 1994

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