

The Presentation

A timed exercise

by Marion Umney

It's half past two and people are beginning to arrive. He's nervous. How on earth did he manage to let himself in for this. He knows nothing about anything. He feels the sweat under his armpits. It's warm in here.

"Can we open a window?" he asks as he catches Michael's eye.

"Sure." Michael turns towards the window, but not before placing his hand gently on Bill's arm.

"You'll be fine. You're the best. Don't forget that."

Bill has forgotten and in that moment doesn't feel like the best at all. A memory flashes across his mind. He must have been about 10 years old. The class had all been invited to prepare a talk for their classmates on the best thing they had done during the holidays. Most of the boys talked about going to theme parks or water parks; a few talked about going to cricket matches with their Dad or going cycling. He didn't have a Dad. His holiday had, by most standards been very quiet, but for him it had been magic. He and his mum had gone to stay at Kew with his Uncle Jack. Jack was a horticulturalist at Kew gardens and allowed Bill to go with him most days.

Bill was mesmerised by the plants and by the work his uncle was doing. His mum loved plants too and had shown him a lot about gardening, how to propagate plants from seeds, how to take cuttings and turn them into a whole new plant, but Uncle Jack was a whole new ballgame. He was grafting one plant onto another, observing them, creating whole new species very carefully, and under controlled conditions. Jack was adamant about that. Too much messing about with nature has got us in the fix we're in so we need to take care. Work with nature not against her. Bill had been allowed to have a go. It was so exciting to get up every morning and rush to "his plant" to see how it was going and by the time the holiday was over little shoots were forming. Jack had promised to send him photos and he'd see it again at half term.

He had done a beautiful presentation (he thought) explaining the process and putting up pictures of the plants. He was so lost in his own excitement he didn't pick up on the restlessness in the room and it wasn't until he'd finished and raised his eyes to the sea of bored faces that he realised.

A flush of shame suffused his face as Mrs Kalman said rather overbrightly “That sounds very interesting Bill. Any questions class?” only to be met by a wall of bored silence.

His friends eventually forgave him as he worked hard to be ‘one of the lads’, but he had always known he was a sham. He was just a geek. Now he is a professor with books and papers to his name, but somehow, he still can’t believe it counts. He sighs as he turns to the audience and tries to smile.

Half an hour later he finally turns to the audience again. He has been deeply immersed in his subject he realises, and has found comfort in that.

As the audience comes into focus he is surprised to see, not just Mike grinning delightedly giving him an enthusiastic thumbs up but a sea of eager faces and a few hands already in the air before he had even had time to ask

“Are there any questions?”