

Classical Studies
By David K. Barnes

Andrew and Oliver are in their 60s (or older). Andrew shows Oliver into his living room after dinner. They're both holding drinks and Andrew is laughing at one of his own jokes. Oliver's been distant all evening.

ANDREW: *(Laughing)* It never rains but it - oop, sorry.

Andrew calls off-stage to his wife.

ANDREW: Sorry, darling? ... No I think we're OK, we don't need anything, do we?

Oliver shakes his head.

ANDREW: Yes, I think maybe just some cheese and biscuits, some nuts, grapes – you know, bring the lot through, and we can just nibble at it, yes... Eh?... Oh, only if you're having one, darling. *(To Oliver)* Do you want a coffee?

OLIVER: Is Belinda having one?

ANDREW: No.

OLIVER: Not for me.

ANDREW: *(To wife)* Yes, I'll have one. None for Oliver... Sorry?...

He gives up on her and crosses to Oliver.

ANDREW: I am going to show you something.

OLIVER: Oh, right.

ANDREW: Sit yourself down.

Oliver sits, reluctantly.

ANDREW: Top up?

OLIVER: No.

ANDREW: You don't mind if I...?

OLIVER: No, no. It's your, er...

Andrew finishes his drink and pours himself a bit of the hard stuff.

OLIVER: You've got a new carpet.

ANDREW: Have I?

OLIVER: Wasn't here last week.

ANDREW: *(Looks. Only just notices. Not too concerned)* Oh yes.

OLIVER: When'd you get it done?

ANDREW: Oh er... Since you were last here, I'd say. You'd have to ask Belinda...

OLIVER: Lynn wants me to re-carpet the hall.

ANDREW: *(Not listening)* Does she?

OLIVER: Thought I'd do it this weekend-

ANDREW: So. There's a story a behind this.

OLIVER: Behind what?

ANDREW: What I'm going to show you.

OLIVER: *(Unenthused)* Right.

ANDREW: The other day, I was killing time during the lunch hour, just bimbuling around the high street, wasting time – or life, really, when you stop to think about it – and, er... I was about to go into Waterstones, you know, to see what they had.

OLIVER: Books.

ANDREW: Yes. But before I go in, I'll tell you who I see coming down the street towards me. Out of the blue, cast your mind back, I see, coming towards me... Mr Charisma.

OLIVER: Who?

ANDREW: Mr Charisma. St Anthony's. You know. John Rutland.

OLIVER: *(Takes an interest)* John Rutland?

ANDREW: You used to call him Mr Charisma.

OLIVER: No I didn't.

ANDREW: Yes you did.

OLIVER: You called him that.

ANDREW: We both did.

OLIVER: One of us did. And it was you.

ANDREW: I think I did it more, certainly, but anyway he's coming towards me – well, past me, and I stopped him because of course I thought, "Oh God," you know, he's recognized me, and I don't *want* to talk to him, but after all it *is* a Thursday so-

OLIVER: (*A little anxious*) Did he say anything? About...

ANDREW: What?

OLIVER: Well... Anything, *about* anything?

ANDREW: No, not really. That's the point: still the same old Rutland. He's working at the stationers on Newbury Road now.

OLIVER: Yes.

ANDREW: You knew?

OLIVER: What? Yes.

Beat.

OLIVER: He told me, the other day. That he was working at the stationers.

ANDREW: Where'd you see him?

OLIVER: In the stationers.

ANDREW: What for?

OLIVER: Stationery. He works there.

ANDREW: Yes I know, I just told you.

OLIVER: I already knew.

ANDREW: You didn't tell me.

OLIVER: No.

Beat.

ANDREW / OLIVER: How was he?

ANDREW: You tell me, you saw him.

OLIVER: He seemed alright.

ANDREW: Yes, I thought so. When I saw him.

OLIVER: Well he was alright when I saw him too. Better actually.

ANDREW: He never changes.

OLIVER: I don't know.

ANDREW: No, he never changed back then and he hasn't changed now. And that's the whole point – I saw him and thought, "Dear Christ, it's been – what – God knows how many years, and you're still the same, *boring*, insufferable arsehole you always were." Lights on, nobody's home, and frankly a good thing too-

OLIVER: (*Anxious*) What's the – what's the – what are you...

Pause. Oliver calms himself. Beat.

OLIVER: You were going to show me something.

ANDREW: Ah, well I'm getting to that, because it was talking to John for those tragic few minutes that I thought, "Fuck me, Andrew, this could be you one day. Tomorrow. Yesterday! Perhaps it's happened and you didn't notice." And I was frightened, I really was. Really frightened.

OLIVER: Frightened?

ANDREW: Of being like that. Boring. Stagnating. Because we have our own circles, our own... ways of perceiving, no new ideas, *unless you seek them out*. Do you know what an "ideological echo chamber" is?

OLIVER: No.

ANDREW: Nor do I but I don't like the sound of them, and I thought, "Right, you're doing something about this *right now*." So I got shot of Mr Charisma and then I took my future into my own hands. Do you know what I did?

Pause. Oliver indicates he doesn't know. Andrew goes across to an end table, picks up a slim Penguin Classics book, and passes it over to Oliver with pride.

ANDREW: There.

He sits down. Beat.

OLIVER: You bought a book?

ANDREW: I did.

Oliver looks at it, not sure what he's meant to say.

ANDREW: It's about the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian.

OLIVER: Oh.

ANDREW: Do you know anything about the Byzantine Emperor Justinian?

OLIVER: Er... No, no I don't.

ANDREW: No I didn't think you did. Nor did I, till I read that. Saw it in the shop, I thought "Expand the mind, Andrew. You don't know anything about the Byzantines. *Take a chance.*" Because every day, you know, you ought to learn something you never knew before. Every day.

He leans, conspiratorially.

ANDREW: The mind has an appetite.

OLIVER: Does it.

ANDREW: And you've got to keep it stimulated, otherwise – you know what – it's just you and yourself in there. Just you and yourself, and nobody wants that. It'd drive you mad. You see what I mean?

OLIVER: No, yes, I do. Yes.

ANDREW: I've been reading this to Belinda when we go to bed, just so we have something to do... She told me she's never known anything like it.

OLIVER: Right.

ANDREW: You could do the same with Lynn. Pick up a new book. Nothing stopping you.

Andrew drinks.

OLIVER: And so what did you learn about him?

ANDREW: Who?

OLIVER: Justinian? What did you learn about him in the end?

ANDREW: Ah. Well. I learnt that Justinian wasn't a very nice man.

Oliver waits for more. There is no more forthcoming.

OLIVER: Right. *(Begins reading the back)*

ANDREW: And that's a fact I would not have known if I hadn't read the book. From cover to cover. To expand the mind.

OLIVER: It says it on the back.

ANDREW: Says what?

OLIVER: "Justinian is a demon king capable of any evil deeds—"

ANDREW: Ye-es.

OLIVER: "A bloodthirsty monster of depravity and cruelty."

ANDREW: But that's just what the *back* says.

OLIVER: That's what *you* said.

ANDREW: Yes but because I've *read the book*, I can tell you *why* all those things are true. That's the difference being knowing and understanding.

OLIVER: Right.

Pause.

OLIVER: So why wasn't Justinian a very nice man?

Long pause.

ANDREW: Taxes.

OLIVER: Ah.

ANDREW: You know, when you get right down to it. It's complex stuff. You'd have to read it for yourself, really.

OLIVER: So is it useful? To know about that?

ANDREW: You never know, do you? Well *you* might, but I don't. I'd rather know about something than not know about it, that's all.

OLIVER: Would you?

ANDREW: Wouldn't you?

OLIVER: Well... that depends.

ANDREW: Oliver. Do you mind if I say something? You've barely paid attention to a word I've said all evening.

OLIVER: No.

ANDREW: Belinda's noticed too. She told me in the kitchen, "He's barely paid attention to you all evening."

OLIVER: She told you that?

ANDREW: No, not exactly. She said "Is he alright?" and I said yes, because I didn't know then that you weren't. You're not alright are you?

OLIVER: No.

ANDREW: You couldn't care less about Justinian, could you?

OLIVER: No, I don't think I could.

ANDREW: No. *(Beat)* I think if you read it, you'd see my point of view. Lynn might thank you for it.

Pause.

OLIVER: Andrew, I'm ... I'm in trouble.

ANDREW: Trouble?

OLIVER: Yes... And I... just need to tell somebody.

ANDREW: I don't mind if you tell me.

Pause.

OLIVER: I'm... I'm... seeing... somebody.

ANDREW: You mean a doctor?

OLIVER: No. I'm... *seeing* somebody.

ANDREW: *Not* a doctor?

OLIVER: No, I'm seeing somebody... who isn't Lynn.

ANDREW: You don't mean another woman?

OLIVER: No.

ANDREW: That's fine then, isn't it?

OLIVER: No I don't think it is.

ANDREW: Why?

OLIVER: It's... John.

ANDREW: Who is?

OLIVER: The one I'm seeing.

ANDREW: John Rutland?

OLIVER: Yes.

ANDREW: Mr Charisma?

OLIVER: Yes.

ANDREW: What for?

OLIVER: Well – company. You know.

ANDREW: You're seeing John Rutland for company?

OLIVER: Yes.

ANDREW: But he's so *boring*.

OLIVER: Yes I used to think so, but once you get to know him he's actually very exciting. And I don't know how to tell Lynn.

ANDREW: What, that he's very exciting?

OLIVER: Well yes, in a way – she doesn't know about it.

ANDREW: Does it matter?

OLIVER: Don't you think it's wrong? I tell her everything.

ANDREW: So why haven't you told her about this?

OLIVER: Well how can I tell her?

ANDREW: You just say, "Look here, Lynn, about John Rutland, you've underestimated him, he's actually very exciting, and I don't want you to say he's boring again." Though frankly I still don't believe you.

OLIVER: That's not what I'm talking about.

ANDREW: What *are* you talking about?

OLIVER: Well. I'm cheating on her.

ANDREW: You're cheating on who?

OLIVER: On Lynn. I'm cheating on Lynn.

ANDREW: You haven't got time for that, you're getting to know John Rutland.

OLIVER: That's who I'm cheating on Lynn with!

ANDREW: Who, John Rutland?

OLIVER: It's an affair!

ANDREW: You're having an affair with John Rutland?

OLIVER: Yes!

ANDREW: You didn't tell me that!

OLIVER: Well I've told you now.

ANDREW: You just said you were seeing him for company.

OLIVER: Yes.

ANDREW: I mean *I'm* company for you, but we're not having an affair.

OLIVER: Yes, I know.

ANDREW: We're not, are we?

OLIVER: No.

Andrew tries to take this all in.

ANDREW: John Rutland?

OLIVER: We just got talking at the stationers.

ANDREW: Went out for dinner?

OLIVER: Yes.

ANDREW: Back to his place?

OLIVER: Yes.

Beat.

OLIVER: Have you ever had sex with a man?

ANDREW: Er... *(Thinks back)* ... No... D'you think I ought to?

OLIVER: I've no idea.

ANDREW: Hmm! Perhaps I should give it a go. I'll run it by Belinda and see what she says. I don't think I could keep that sort of thing a secret like you can.

OLIVER: No. *(Beat)* I'll have to tell Lynn. *(Beat)* I'll... Maybe I should-

ANDREW: This is funny. Don't take this the wrong way, but I used to think – well I say me, *Belinda* always used to say you were a bit dull.

OLIVER: Belinda said that?

ANDREW: No, I did. But she agreed with me. I mean we're both a bit dull, aren't we? In our own ways. Most people are dull when you get right down to it, I suppose, and sometimes you've just got to face up to it. That's what I tell Belinda. Sparks come and go but people are people and we've got to accept it, and find a way through.

Beat.

ANDREW: *(To himself, still can't believe it)* John Rutland...

Pause.

ANDREW: I ought to see where my coffee's got to. You didn't want any, did you?

OLIVER: No.

Andrew exits. Oliver picks up the book. Puts it down.

OLIVER: *(Practicing)* Lynn. I... I've been... I've been...

He gives up. Andrew re-enters. He looks disquieted.

ANDREW: Wouldn't go out there if I were you. Belinda's crying, into the sink. Just standing there, crying. *(Beat)* I told her not to bother with the coffee. *(Beat)* I'd make it myself but, um...

He sits down.

OLIVER: I don't know what to do.

Pause. Andrew cradles his drink. Oliver stares into space.

ANDREW: I should buy another book.

END