

Harold Pinter

(1930-)

Text 1

The Dumb Waiter

Scene: A basement¹ room. Two beds, flat against the back wall. A serving hatch, closed, between the beds. A door to the kitchen and lavatory, left. A door to a passage, right.

BEN is lying on a bed, left, reading a paper. GUS is sitting on a bed, right, tying his shoelaces, with difficulty. Both are dressed in shirts, trousers and braces.

Silence.

GUS ties his laces, yawns and begins to walk slowly to the door, left. He stops, looks down, and shakes his foot.

BEN lowers his paper and watches him. GUS kneels and unties his shoe-lace and slowly takes off the shoe. He looks inside it and brings out a flattened match-box. He shakes it and examines it. Their eyes meet.

BEN rattles his paper and reads. GUS puts the match-box in his pocket and bends down to put on his shoe. He ties his lace, with difficulty. BEN lowers his paper and watches him. GUS walks to the door, left, stops, and shakes the other foot. He kneels, unties his shoe-lace, and slowly takes off the shoe. He looks inside it and brings out a flattened cigarette packet. He shakes it and examines it. Their eyes meet. BEN rattles his paper and reads. GUS puts the packet in his pocket, bends down, puts on his shoe and ties the lace.

He wanders off, left.

BEN slams the paper down on the bed and glares after him. He picks up the paper and lies on his back, reading.

Silence.

A lavatory chain is pulled twice off, left, but the lavatory does not flush.

Silence.

GUS re-enters, left, and halts at the door, scratching his head.

BEN slams down the paper.

BEN. Kaw!

He picks up the paper.

1. **basement** = underground floor.

What about this? Listen to this!

He refers to the paper.

A man of eighty-seven wanted to cross the road. But there was a lot of traffic, see? He couldn't see how he was going to squeeze through. So he crawled under a lorry.

GUS. He what?

BEN. He crawled under a lorry. A stationary lorry.

GUS. No?

BEN. The lorry started and ran over him.

GUS. Go on²!

BEN. That's what it says here.

GUS. Get away.

BEN. It's enough to make you want to puke³, isn't it?

GUS. Who advised him to do a thing like that?

BEN. A man of eighty-seven crawling under a lorry!

GUS. It's unbelievable.

BEN. It's down here in black and white.

GUS. Incredible.

Silence.

GUS *shakes his head and exits.* BEN *lies back and reads.*

The lavatory chain is pulled once off left, but the lavatory does not flush.

BEN *whistles at an item in the paper.*

GUS *re-enters.*

I want to ask you something.

BEN. What are you doing out there?

GUS. Well, I was just —

BEN. What about the tea?

GUS. I'm just going to make it.

BEN. Well, go on, make it.

GUS. Yes, I will. [*He sits in a chair. Ruminatively.*] He's laid on some very nice crockery⁴ this time. I'll say that. It's sort of striped. There's a white stripe.

BEN *reads.*

It's very nice. I'll say that.

BEN *turns the page.*

You know, sort of round the cup. Round the rim. All the rest of it's black, you see. Then the saucer's black, except for right in the middle, where the cup goes, where it's white.

BEN *reads.*

Then the plates are the same, you see. Only they've got a black stripe — the plates — right across the middle. Yes, I'm quite taken with the crockery.

BEN [*still reading*] What do you want plates for? You're not going to eat.

2. **go on** = don't fool me.

3. **to puke** = to vomit.

4. **crockery** = ceramic cups, saucers and plates.

GUS. I've brought a few biscuits.

BEN. Well, you'd better eat them quick.

GUS. I always bring a few biscuits. Or a pie. You know I can't drink tea without anything to eat.

BEN. Well, make the tea then, will you? Time's getting on.

GUS *brings out the flattened cigarette packet and examines it.*

GUS. You got any cigarettes? I think I've run out.

He throws the packet high up and leans forward to catch it.

I hope it won't be a long job, this one.

Aiming carefully, he flips the packet under his bed.

Oh, I wanted to ask you something.

BEN *[slamming his paper down]* Kaw!

GUS. What's that?

BEN. A child of eight killed a cat!

GUS. Get away.

BEN. It's a fact. What about that, eh? A child of eight killing a cat!

GUS. How did he do it?

BEN. It was a girl.

GUS. How did she do it?

BEN. She —

He picks up the paper and studies it.

It doesn't say.

GUS. Why not?

BEN. Wait a minute. It just says — Her brother, aged eleven, viewed the incident from the toolshed.

GUS. Go on!

BEN. That's bloody ridiculous.

Pause.

GUS. I bet he did it.

BEN. Who?

GUS. The brother.

BEN. I think you're right.

Pause.

[Slamming down the paper.] What about that, eh? A kid of eleven killing a cat and blaming it on his little sister of eight! It's enough to —

He breaks off in disgust and seizes the paper, gus rises.

GUS. What time is he getting in touch?

BEN reads.

What time is he getting in touch?

BEN. What's the matter with you? It could be any time.
Any time.

GUS. [*moves to the foot of BEN's bed.*] Well, I was going to ask you something.

BEN. What?

GUS. Have you noticed the time that tank takes to fill?

BEN. What tank?

GUS. In the lavatory.

BEN. No. Does it?

GUS. Terrible.

BEN. Well, what about it?

GUS. What do you think's the matter with it?

BEN. Nothing.

GUS. Nothing?

BEN. It's got a deficient ballcock⁵, that's all.

GUS. A deficient what?

BEN. Ballcock.

GUS. No? Really?

BEN. That's what I should say.

GUS. Go on! That didn't occur to me.

GUS [*wanders to his bed and presses the mattress.*]

I didn't have a very restful sleep today, did you? It's not much of a bed. I could have done with another blanket too. [*He catches sight of a picture on the wall.*] Hello, what's this? [*Peering at it.*] 'The First Eleven.' Cricketers. You seen this, Ben?

BEN [*reading.*] What?

GUS. The first eleven.

BEN. What?

GUS. There's a photo here of the first eleven.

BEN. What first eleven?

GUS [*studying the photo.*] It doesn't say.

BEN. What about that tea?

GUS. They all look a bit old to me.

GUS wanders downstage, looks out front, then all about the room.

I wouldn't like to live in this dump⁶. I wouldn't mind if you had a window, you could see what it looked like outside.

BEN. What do you want a window for?

GUS. Well, I like to have a bit of a view, Ben. It whiles away the time⁷.

He walks about the room.

I mean, you come into a place when it's still dark, you come into a room you've never seen before, you

5. **ballcock** = float valve.

6. **dump** = dirty depressing place.

7. **whiles away the time** = passes the time.

sleep all day, you do your job, and then you go away
in the night again.

Pause.

I like to get a look at the scenery. You never get the
chance in this job.

BEN. You get your holidays, dont' you?

GUS. Only a fortnight.

BEN. (*lowering the paper.*) You kill me. Anyone would
think you're working every day. How often do we do
a job? Once a week? What are you complaining
about?

GUS. Yes, but we've got to be on tap though, haven't
we? You can't move out of the house in case a call
comes.

BEN. You know what your trouble is?

GUS. What?

BEN. You haven't got any interests.

GUS. I've got interests.

BEN. What? Tell me one of your interests.

Pause

GUS. I've got interests.

BEN. Look at me. What have I got?

GUS. I don't know. What?

BEN. I've got my woodwork. I've got my model boats.
Have you ever seen me idle? I'm never idle. I know
how to occupy my time, to its best advantage. Then
when a call comes, I'm ready.

GUS. Don't you ever get a bit fed up?

BEN. Fed up? What with?

Silence.

BEN reads. GUS feels in the pocket of his jacket, which
hangs on the bed.

GUS. You got any cigarettes? I've run out.

The lavatory flushes off left.

There she goes.

GUS sits on his bed.

No, I mean, I say the crockery's good. It is. It's very
nice. But that's about all I can say for this place. It's
worse than the last one. Remember that last place we
were in? Last time, where was it? At least there was a
wireless there. No, honest. He doesn't seem to bother
much about our comfort these days.

BEN. When are you going to stop jabbering*?

GUS. You'd get rheumatism in a place like this, if you
stay long.

BEN. We're not staying long. Make the tea, will you?
We'll be on the job in a minute.

8. **jabbering** = talking
constantly.

GUS picks up a small bag by his bed and brings out a packet of tea. He examines it and looks up.

GUS. Eh, I've been meaning to ask you.

BEN. What the hell is it now?

GUS. Why did you stop the car this morning, in the middle of that road?

BEN. (*lowering the paper*). I thought you were asleep.

GUS. I was, but I woke up when you stopped. You did stop, didn't you?

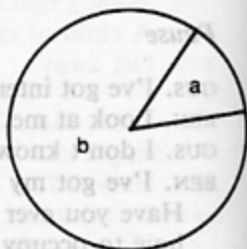
Pause.

Tasks

1. In Pinter's stage directions of *The Dumb Waiter* different emphasis is laid on the description of the setting and on the directions for the actors' movements. Read the stage directions p. 645 and complete the following diagram.

a =

b =



2. Pinter gives more emphasis to b because he wants to:

focus the attention on the actor rather than the setting
 create expectation
 emphasize the inadequacy of words to convey meaning
 clarify the personal relationship of the characters
 provide reasons for the characters' actions
 react against naturalistic drama
 convey the idea of lack of communication
 give hints on the different personalities of the two characters
 anticipate a sense of menace
 give an atmosphere of tension

(Cross out the answers that you consider inappropriate).

3. Write what is unusual in this setting and where you would expect to find a place like this.

what is unusual: ...

where: ...

4. Ben and Gus are said to be two killers. Read the whole extract and underline the elements upon which this interpretation may be based.
5. Gus mentions 'he' three times. Underline the pronoun in the text and make hypotheses on who the referent may be. Write your guesses below.

6. The two characters behave differently. Ben often snubs Gus. He does this in three ways:
- 1 He ignores Gus's questions by not answering them.
 - 2 He answers by changing the topic.
 - 3 He answers rudely.

Gus on the other hand:

- 4 Ignores Ben's requests.
- 5 Tries to defend himself.
- 6 Responds appropriately.

Find examples of the above in the dialogue and write the appropriate number next to the characters' remarks in the text. Then consider the examples you have found and decide what they reveal about the relationship between the characters.

7. Here is what Pinter said when he gave a speech in 1962. Read this excerpt and point out what use he makes of his concept in the play.

'There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it. That is its continual reference. The speech we hear is an indication of that we don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smokescreen which keeps the other in its place. When true silence falls we are still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness'.

8. This is how the play develops.

Suddenly the dumb waiter begins to move and brings orders which gradually become more and more exotic. The two men try desperately to provide the dishes requested even though they have hardly anything to send up. Finally through a speaking tube they establish contact with someone upstairs who complains about the food and in the end gives one last instruction while Gus is out to fetch a glass of water. Ben gets the order saying that the victim will be coming from the door. The door opens and Gus appears. The play ends with the two killers staring at each other.

It is obvious that one of the characters in the victim and the other is the executioner. This aspect of Ben and Gus's relationship is hinted at in the text you have read. Look at the information you have gathered. Write down in what way Pinter provides this hint.

9. Read the definition of 'standard language' below and discuss whether the language used by Ben and Gus deviates from the definition or not. Write the result of your discussion below:

Standard Language: The variety of a language which has the highest status in a community or nation and which is usually based on the speech and writing of educated native speakers of the language.

(J. Richards, J. Platt, H. Weber, *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics*).

Result: