

CHANGING WORLDS

BY

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OF CENTRETRUTHS DIGITAL MEDIA



CDM Prose

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CHAPTER ONE

Michael Savage wearily sat on his bed and casually ran his hand over its puffy white quilt, as though to brush away some loose hairs that had fallen out of his head during the evening. He had just ceased listening to side two of a cassette and, now that it stood motionless in its deck, he was in some doubt as to his next choice of musical entertainment, particularly in light of the fact that his tape library was, as yet, comparatively small in relation to the considerable size of his by-now redundant record collection.

Naturally, his neighbours wouldn't want to hear the same cassettes too often. Indeed, to judge by the philistine nature of their pursuits, it was more than probable that they wouldn't want to hear anything of his at all; though what he was supposed to do with himself, all evening, other than listen to music and play his acoustic guitar, God alone knew! Perhaps his neighbours would have preferred him to watch TV or listen to some serial on the radio, to do something they could all relate to, irrespective of the fact that young Savage had never felt any great inclination to acquiesce in what he considered to be philistine indulgences. True, he did possess a small radio of reasonably decent hi-fi, but he had no qualms about being rigorously selective, and only listened to it when there was anything worth listening to, which, from recent experience, didn't seem to be all that often!

However, there occasionally came moments when he was at a complete loss for something to do, when he didn't fancy walking the drab-looking local streets, listening to music, reading a book, or practising blues runs on his clapped-out acoustic guitar. Then, in desperation, he would turn to the radio, find a discussion, broadcast, story, or play and, if the subject-matter didn't particularly appeal to him, just listen to the words, noting pronunciations, vocal inflections, tonal changes, individual mannerisms, etc., and contenting himself, as far as possible, with the English language, that ubiquitous tongue of the modern world. At least that sufficed to keep one in touch with the human voice. One could learn a lot from that, indeed one could! But not tonight. For some reason the thought of listening to the radio never even crossed his mind.

He got up off his bed, wearily shuffled across to his radio-cassette player and removed the tape. 'Too much dust here,' he thought, giving the tape deck a quick inspection. 'It wouldn't cost me that much to buy some head-cleaning fluid. I suppose I don't normally take such things that

seriously, not being particularly fussy about the condition of my equipment.'

He quickly slid the cassette into its plastic case and returned it to its allocated place in one of the three racks which served to house the rudiments of what he fancied to be a quintessential distillation of choice sounds, the making of a musical obsession. As usual, he scanned both the composers' names and titles of these tapes, as if to reassure himself that nothing *infra dignum* or irrelevant to his tastes had crept-in on the sly, that he wouldn't have to throw anything out because of a suspicion of being duped by incompatible material. How often, in the past, had he waded, with critical self-doubt, through both books and records in search of misfits, cultural pariahs which seemed a grave obstacle to his peace of mind, a source of sporadic incertitude and sleepless nights! Ideally, he wanted his various collections to be representative of his current tastes, the essence of a private and highly personal culture that changed as he changed, enabling him to discard those examples of his literary or musical curiosity which somehow failed to satisfy him. He had no desire to participate in the habit of one who hangs-on to everything he buys. For the sight of a work the cover or contents of which he detested was not beyond evoking an analogue, in his wayward mind, with the sight of a crucifix to Count Dracula!

He turned away from both tapes and ruminations alike, walked slowly across to his one and only clock (which rested face-down on the top shelf of his bookcase because it rarely worked in an upright position), picked it up and noted the time. At 9.30pm it was much too early to go to bed. It didn't do to acquire a sort of defeatist complex from turning in too early. He would just have to preoccupy himself as best he could for the next couple of hours.

"Hello? Oh, hello!" As usual it was for the ugly-looking female student from the room above. "How are you? Yeah, fine. We went out for the day. Are you? When? Well I never! Oh, don't! You're kidding! He's such a ... Ha-ha! Yeah, I thought as much. Aren't men ...?"

Michael turned away from his bookcase, from where her strident voice was all too easily overheard, and wearily sat down on his bed again. Not once in over six months had he answered that damn telephone. He had consistently shunned it, even though it usually rang dozens of times a day. It was never for him anyway, so what would have been the point? He certainly wasn't one to run around in the capacity of unofficial servant to his neighbours! He didn't even know who they all were anyway; they came and went and, as far as possible, he took little or no notice of them. In this house, people generally kept to themselves and didn't ask questions.

"I see. So you're going next week? Oh, damn! Too bad. Okay then.

Bye." The telephone clicked off and heavy feet, shod in high heels, ran up the thinly carpeted wooden stairs to the first-floor landing, leaving him to his thoughts again.

'Subdued conversation, footsteps above the ceiling, coming to a halt, starting again, stopping, starting, shuffling across her floor. Be helpful if I had eyes that could see through the ceiling, see exactly what goes-on up there. Frustrates me, listening to their noise every evening without being able to see the cause of it. Better still if she's wearing a short skirt. See if her legs are any better than her face.... Reminds me vaguely of when I was about three years old and used to crawl between my mother's feet to discover what she kept up her skirt. She usually kicked my toy cars away when I got too close, so I never did get to see very much. Something in the order of an early rebuff, you could say. Made it difficult for me to get the impression of being wanted. Like that time after she had cold-bloodedly sent me to the Children's Home, several years later, when the house parents there kicked me around the floor and told me that I was the lowest thing on earth because their infant son had a moment before wriggled through my arms and fallen onto the carpet, slightly bumping his head in the process. Hard to forget an experience like that because your emotions are so highly charged at the time, and that's generally how memories stick. Of course, in the heat of the moment his parents wouldn't have realized they were inflicting nasty memories on me, and even if they had they probably wouldn't have cared, considering that their only child was slightly hurt in falling and I was adjudged responsible for it. Then in the throes of what one can only suppose to be a repentant mood they later turn around and tell me that God knows all about my sins, but that He will stick by me in times of need if only I give my heart to His keeping. Yeah, and a vengeful old jerk He must be too, if they were anything to judge by!'

He angrily stared a moment through the narrow french windows of his bedsitter, seeing but not looking. He had no real desire to look at anything anyway, since the view beyond them hardly constituted anything particularly worth looking at, so overgrown with weeds was the back garden. He might just as well turn back to his thoughts again.

'Thank goodness that phone doesn't ring quite as often as the one in my last lodgings! Conversations going on most of the night, and sometimes as late as 2.00am. Always some nuisance blabbering about his misfortunes, some idiot trying to induce his ex-wife or girlfriend or whatever to meet him for a weekend get-together, to wear her best clothes, etc., because he would be nicely soused and eager to get his end in at the first favourable opportunity. Blabbering and swearing for up to an hour on the damn thing,

and rarely getting anywhere either! A dosshouse if ever there was one! Sheer hell! Well, I'm glad that much is over and done with anyway. I certainly wouldn't want to live in a dump like *that* again!

On the opposite wall the large colour poster of a painting by Salvador Dali entitled *Swans Reflecting Elephants* began to impose its outlandish landscape on his lethargic sensibilities, and the almost instantaneous mental assimilation of it engendered, in his imagination, the notion that he was driving some space vehicle through uncharted territory towards the edge of a lake where the aforementioned scene suddenly arrested his stunned attention and brought the vehicle in question to a jolting halt. He was staring through the windscreen at what might well have been a scene on Mars. For had a weirder vision previously crossed the windscreen of any imaginary space-vehicle of his, he would have known it and been able to corroborate it with dozens of examples freshly culled from the repository of a memory well-furnished with such landscapes.

However, for the time being he was both highly absorbed in the insight afforded him by this latest discovery and secretly elated that he should have conceived of such a notion in the midst of several more down-to-earth ruminations. Indeed, Dali's brilliant idea of fusing the watery reflections of swans and nearby tree trunks with the heads and legs of on-the-spot elephants had already appealed to his imagination, and he now thought it just as well that you didn't discover everything about any given thing all at once but, on the contrary, gradually woke up to various aspects of it when the time and mood were propitious. For such a gradual process of enlightenment helped to make life more interesting. As with a multitude of other things, you had to wait until you had matured into them before really acquiring a worthwhile appreciation of their true worth.

'When I was in the local bookshop the other day', he resumed thoughtfully, 'that book on Dali easily caught my eye. Bit I read about his meditating in front of a Vermeer and subsequently sketching a pair of rhinoceros horns ... very surreal indeed! The essence of Dali. Surrealism-while-you-wait; camera poised to click real-life surreal montage. Vaguely reminds me of a former friend of mine who thought Dali a lunatic because it was reported that the painter had told some interviewer he would rather go to a restaurant and order a lobster with telephone, or lobster telephone, than the usual gastronomic fare. Typical example of what Baudelaire called "Universal misunderstanding", as if Dali were a plumber, insurance agent, clerk, or lawyer to spend time mouthing their jargon instead of his own, i.e. that of a fully fledged genius of the surreal. I suppose few people would think it odd if a lawyer discussed law in a restaurant. Perfectly feasible, if a

shade tasteless. Could even give his fellow diners indigestion. More lawyers in the world than artists of Dali's calibre anyway. The sanity of numbers.'

The old woman who lived in the next-door room had just closed the front door behind her return and was busily rattling her keys about in the hallway. 'She always makes such an abominable row in trying to find the keyhole to her room that anyone would think the damn thing kept moving about!' thought Michael in exasperation.

However, she wasn't quite the doting old crone he liked to imagine, and he half-surmised that she made a nuisance of herself on purpose, as a form of retaliation for the music he habitually played in the evenings. Bearing in mind the thinness of the wall separating their two rooms, that seemed a fairly plausible conjecture, at any rate!

Succeeding with the key at last, she entered her room and Michael Savage's thoughtful head heard the door slam-to behind her. 'Safe at last!' he went on, with her still in mind, 'safe from an evil spirit, perhaps one of her former accomplices in life who, like Maupassant's *Horla*, will continuously dog her steps, inhibit her from either feeling or touching herself, make her imagine she's being watched, etc. Old spinsters like that usually don't have any company. They gradually disintegrate. Probably wouldn't want to make fools of themselves by trying to gain access to the company of people well accustomed to it. They gradually become more wrapped-up in themselves, more suspicious of others, increasingly the prisoners of their personal circumstances. I don't even know her full name. Just an ugly old bag who occasionally receives a formal letter addressed to a Miss J. Bass. Creeps around in her room as though she were at a private séance. Often has the radio on. Usually classics. Not much else a woman of her age can really listen to, is there?

'Well, I would sometimes like to feel sorry for her but, try as I might, it's no use. The net result is that I only end-up feeling sorry for myself, having to live next to her. Pity really, because there are so many lonely people in the world, these days, and not all of them are elderly either. No-one with whom to talk. Probably wouldn't feel like talking to anyone even if the opportunity were to arise. I mean, where could she begin, assuming solitary deprivation hadn't rendered her wholly inarticulate? Does part-time work somewhere during the day though, so she evidently has something going for her.... Wonder if she's ever had a man? It wouldn't be impossible but, all the same, I'd hardly be surprised to learn that she hadn't. Must be awfully frustrating for a woman, living alone so many years. All work and no play. And they say the sexual urge is stronger in women? I suppose it

depends on the woman really. Some of them are awfully tame. If I've seen each of the three or four females who live in this house more than a handful of times since moving here, over six months ago, I'd be very surprised. Like the rest of my neighbours, they scuttle away into their own rooms before anyone can accost them.... Not that I'm a man for forming crab-like gestures! Heaven forbid! But they don't know that, so they scuttle away in good time. Saves embarrassment, I suppose.'

He lay back on his bed and languidly watched a large fly darting around the room. It seemed to be getting highly annoyed with itself as it flew round and round, up and down, in and out of one thing or another, while buzzing vehemently and colliding with just about every damn thing that got in its way.

It was always the same on warm evenings. You opened the window to let-in some fresh air and, before long, some winged insect had found its way through the opening and commenced torturing itself between the walls. However, the most obvious solution, namely to acquire some cotton mesh with which to prevent ingress, hadn't exactly met with Michael Savage's approval, in view of the fact that his room was rather dingy and he preferred, in consequence, to let-in as much light as possible. It was simply too bad that these unfortunate insects had to stick their snouts into everything! Short of shooing them out again or swatting them to death, he would just have to put up with it. At least he had the consolation of knowing that a fairly clean room wasn't something that would greatly appeal to flies.

He rose from his bed again and wandered over to the mirror, which appeared to hover atop the dressing table like a guardian angel. The sun had lightly tanned his face, and this aspect of his overall facial appearance now pleased him. His hair was growing beyond the six-inch mark, but that didn't particularly bother him because he was due to visit his local barber within the next few days. A six-inch growth of hair was no great inconvenience to a young man who hadn't yet turned twenty-four!

He closely looked at his eyes and nose in the mirror. The former was indicating, through some puffy rings, signs of tiredness, the latter, through its gently aquiline contours, the mark of what he took to be a man of literary and philosophical, though especially philosophical, disposition. 'No boils in view anyway,' he thoughtfully mused. 'Grew out of them some time ago. Still get the odd one sprouting from the epidermal undergrowth now and again, but it seems they're fast running out of virgin pasture. They don't thrive on the old spots quite so well. Have to find somewhere else to sprout up, like my back and chest. But I usually nip them in their purulent bud

before they get a chance to really tarnish my relatively handsome appearance. A few small scars, but nothing serious. Worst place is up in the nostrils. Bad on the lips, too. Used to put me through hell as a youth. Probably some blood trouble at the root of it. Might even have had something to do with that burst appendix I experienced at sixteen. Some of the poison seeped into my bloodstream. Seem to recall getting my first boil at around that time. All very unnatural, when you think about it. Adolescent tribulations! Had a difficult time obtaining the right prescription from the local doctor; everything he prescribed only seemed to exacerbate the problem, making the boils worse. Ended-up going to him every other week with the same sorry story: "Those pills didn't work for me. Have you any other suggestion?" Must have exhausted most of his options by the time he got around to prescribing chest pills. At first I didn't realize, but they seemed to do the trick. A question of faith. Got the psychology right in the end. Faith works miracles we're told. Believe something will do you good and the chances are you may pull through. Believe it won't and, no matter how applicable it may be, you might as well write yourself off there and then. Comes down to the witch-doctor principle, the frame-of-mind you're in at the time. Reason doctors are generally so positive about things, to prevent you from worrying yourself into a worse condition. More or less the same principle with fortune-tellers and astrologers. Giving people what they want, flattering the ego, conciliating, appeasing. "Why, yes, you ought to become a poet with that sort of gift for words. - Why, yes, I think you'll do very well in that field if you utilize your considerable diplomatic potential. - Ah, yes, you'll meet a highly attractive and very intelligent young woman pretty soon, during the next few weeks in fact." Financially shrewder than giving them a lot of bad news, I suppose. People don't usually consult fortune-tellers and astrologers for bad news anyway. They're mostly screwed-up at the time, hoping for an indication of better things ahead, a favourable prognosis, as it were.

'It's strange when you think about it really, but there are planets in the Solar System by the names of Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto, which are in turn symbolically identified with different abstractions culled from Roman mythology, like Venus with love, Mars with war, etc., and astrologers tell you that you came under the influence of certain of these abstractions when you were born in a certain place at a certain time. But if you're honest with yourself and look at astrology from a sort of existentialist angle, you'll see clearly enough - and without the need of long-range telescopes - that there really aren't any such places as Mercury, Venus, Mars, etc., because what one actually has in the

Solar System are large orbiting bodies which, for want of an alternative name, we choose to call planets, with their respective pagan names and mythological symbolism, so that we can commonly agree on what's what. Okay, so we commonly agree that Venus is symbolic of love, since the planets derive their names from Roman mythology and Venus was the goddess of love. But that really isn't good enough, because you're only too aware there's really no such place as Venus, that there's just a large mass of molten stuff up there in space which you could alternatively agree to call Elephasia if you wanted to, and that mass of molten stuff has as much to do with love as my lexicon, think what you like!

'Indeed, now I've gone this far I can imagine the sort of argument which some die-hard astrologer would attempt to counter me with. A ludicrous one, to say the least, but an argument of sorts all the same. He would inform me that even if those large masses of planetary stuff aren't given mythical names, they still exist and consequently continue to exert an influence on your birth or mind or destiny. In other words, now that, as nameless *things*, the planets are stripped to their bare essentials, viz. size, position, velocity, etc., it would simply be necessary to plot their positions, note down all the people born under a given planetary pattern, say the universal influence of Libra, round them up in adult life, take particulars, and then see whether they possessed anything in common.... Which, considering the vast numbers of people involved and their geographical diversity, could well prove a daunting, not to say impossible, task for even the most obdurately irrational of persons! Well, I won't go into further suppositions on *that* score. Let those who want to deceive themselves continue to do so, until such time as they might learn sense or come up against the Last Judgement. After all, superstitions won't die out overnight.'

Leaving his mirror, the young 'rationalist' ambled across to the sink, cleaned his teeth with a bent and worn toothbrush, drank a glass of slimy tap-water, and then began to undress. It was barely 10.15pm, so he was getting ready for bed well before his usual time, a realization which made him feel slightly ashamed of himself for seemingly giving-in so early. True, he had read for over two hours earlier in the evening, had listened to music from about 8.30-9.15pm, had thought quite a lot of exacting thoughts. His day at the office hadn't exactly been what one would call a bed of roses. On the contrary, it had well-and-truly exhausted him. It was almost impossible to write successfully, to write as he would have liked to, after such hard work. One instinctively took to recreation or relaxation, to whatever one imagined made one's life worthwhile or at the very least bearable. Well, a majority of people did anyway, even if he had always been a bit more

obdurate or idealistic, a potential artist who felt himself to be somewhat restricted through solitude and consequently coerced into more intellectuality than was good for him. If he had never particularly gone out of his way to make friends, it was partly on the grounds that what he took to be his real work only began in the evenings when, clerical routine behind him, he was comparatively free to dedicate the rest of the day to the service of his literary aspirations.

In the pursuit of these aspirations, which alternated between reading with intent to study and dilettantish composition, he had neither the time nor the inclination to rub shoulders with others in, say, some neighbourhood pub, since too dedicated to his 'deeper calling', as he liked to think of it, to be able to break away from it without feeling the frustrations of a seemingly futile existence. He would certainly be deceiving himself if, with all his knowledge and literary know-how, he continued to rot away in the boring company of people who knew virtually nothing about the world's greatest literature, had never even heard of Flaubert, Kafka, or Hamsun, let alone read them, and would have been extremely hard-pressed to define the meaning of a word like 'eulogy', or to spell 'instantaneous'. A reasonably profound education was only justified, it seemed to him, if one could make use of it rather than become its victim. Education without a purpose or outlet was of scant avail in such a fiercely competitive world, a world orientated towards the survival of the smartest. Whether one liked it or not, one had a duty to oneself, one had to live with oneself, and that, as he knew only too well, wasn't always an easy thing to do! Why, this very evening he was too tired to have attempted any serious literary work. It didn't pay to goad oneself mercilessly, even if one's circumstances were so disagreeable that, in one's impatience to escape them, one was driven to exert oneself more than would otherwise have been the case. No, one had to succumb to lethargy sometimes, to face facts. Maybe he would have some interesting or gratifying dreams, during the night, which would partly compensate him for his current impotence? Like dreams with pretty women in them, for instance.

Yes, but you couldn't will it. You had to entrust yourself to your mind's keeping, let it make its own enigmatic decisions irrespective of your conscious priorities. It would amuse itself in its own fashion, in due course. Something interesting was bound to turn up, if you waited patiently and weren't regularly insomniac. Even medieval people would have had access to a world of interior visions which probably transcended the visual impact of modern film by as much if not more than the best of our dreams do today.

Of course, Michael was aware that his dream-world was no simple

paradise, that it contained as many vicissitudes as one either cared or dared to imagine, and some of them beyond imagining; experience having endowed him with a peculiar aversion to that kind of dream which, by dint of its pictorial clarity and sinister feasibility, well-nigh convinces one it isn't really a dream at all but a prolongation or resurrection of waking life, and subsequently engenders a combination of relief and thanksgiving, in the mind, that what took place there wasn't real after all, since one is still free to get out of bed and go about one's usual affairs, which seem relatively congenial, not to say trivial, by comparison. Fortunately, however, those kinds of oppressively impressionable dreams were comparatively rare, so it was unlikely, on balance, that anything of such psychic magnitude would envelop his sleeping mind tonight. He would just have to wait and see what fate had in store for him.

Having undressed, laid out the same clothes for the morning, and then inserted malleable wax earplugs into his ears - a strategy he had developed with a degree of physical inconvenience to safeguard himself from the even greater inconvenience caused by the various noises in which his nearest neighbours freely indulged themselves every night - he switched off the light and gently eased himself between the nylon sheets of his moderately comfortable, albeit long-suffering, single bed. He reflected that the earplugs would have to be changed in the morning, since it wasn't wise to allow them to become so grubby, through repeated use, that one ran the risk of a serious ear infection. Since they were already fairly grubby, he decided he would only push them right in to his ears as a last resort, i.e. if there was too much noise. However, his neighbours were relatively quiet at present, in fact so quiet that he found himself free to wander down some fairly congenial avenues of thought.

'Muffled sounds above, connubial bliss. Television on in house next door. Old woman coughing in front room, whether ironically or otherwise I don't pretend to know. - *J'espère, tu espères, il espère, nous espérons, vous espérez, ils espèrent. Je sors du train maintenant parce que je suis malade. Vous aimez ces choses? Je les ai achetées hier matin chez le marchand de gants. Je voudrais une petite chambre pour deux personnes seulement. Oui, mon amie et moi. (Complet, monsieur, malheureusement.) O, je vois. Eh bien! J'aime vos belles jambes, ma petite fleur.*

'Just a few French phrases to round off the day, pretend that things aren't as bad as I picture them. Might even get a sense of intellectual or cultural achievement if I keep at it long enough, go to sleep with a good conscience. Won't get to sleep for an hour or two anyway, maybe longer. That period of insomnia last year - terrible! Too much consciousness, brain

breaking under pressure of it, incipient neurosis. Even tried sleeping pills, but they only made me feel like a moron next day. Wound-up with too many psychological disparities, thoroughly neurotic. Next stop paranoia, persecution complexes running riot. Final stop ... no thanks! Too many sharks pulling everywhichway as it is. Soon learn to stand on your own two feet again, ignore the mob's acrimonious banter. Little alternative. Feel much better without pills anyway, have faith in myself again. See through it all after awhile. Find your way out of the maze of incertitude. Breeze clear before you get lost again.

'Je vais seul, tu vas seul, il va seul, nous allons seuls, vous allez....
Haven't fantasized so much recently, though I had a regular spell of it at one time. Goes on and off, like dreams. Wake up to the realization, one day, that you could go mad if you kept at it too long, get caught in your habits and wind-up preferring fantasy to the real thing. Same with magazines, which can lead you seriously astray if you aren't careful. Like walking along the street with a talkative bloke beside you and missing out on a glimpse of the occasional attractive female who passes by, because he demands too much of your attention. One path to perversity. Have to watch who you mix with, binding habits engendering excessive sexual constipation. Find yourself in a social cul-de-sac of your own making!

'Wonderful power fantasy has, though. Best of a bad job, so to speak ... I mean, think. But annoying when you can't sustain the images. Very frustrating! Frustrates me, too, when her bedsprings are jingling upstairs and her boyfriend is doing it for all he's fucking-well worth, and she's moaning and coaxing and giving off irresistibly endearing little incentives to goad him on, the stupid prick, and I'm lying here in the doldrums wondering how to ignore their noises altogether.... Well, at least they're fairly normal, considering how merciless city life is at breeding perversions. Plenty of wankers about. Used to indulge in a stint of masturbation myself occasionally, just to keep my hand in, so to think, and test my virility. After all, it wouldn't do to go impotent all of a sudden. One should have at least three erections a day, according to what I was reading somewhere. It comes on you unaccountably sometimes, the most seemingly innocuous or incongruous of contexts. Like sitting in a crowded bus. Realize you're alighting next stop, so you try to get it down, make it shrink back to normal. You wouldn't want to draw too much attention to yourself, especially in summertime, what with the possibility of old women in heat. Could even give someone the wrong impression, someone you couldn't in the least fancy.

'Je vidé, tu vidés, j'ai vidé, tu as vidé, je vidais, tu vidais, il vidait,

vidons.... Pity I can't exercise my French on an attractive young Frenchwoman. Have to throw yourself in at the deep end if you want to swim. My ex-teacher, Jacques Potôt, authentic Frenchman. He knew most of the contemporary idiosyncrasies of Parisian communication. Typically French in many ways. I found it difficult not to laugh in his face sometimes, the way he pronounced certain words so emphatically, screwing up his features and accentuating his vocal delivery with the help of violent gestures. Bit of an actor really. Good company, though. Taught me like a friend. Infinitely better than those stuffed parrots who always keep you at a psychic distance and never reveal anything about their personal affairs. Only in it for the money.

Faites attention, mes eleves. Parlez après moi les mots "bon", "gros", et "grand". Il y a deux choses sur cette table - un livre et une plume.... Glad I didn't have to put up with too much of that sort of thing! It would have been like being back at school again.... Oh, these words, these words! Innate obduracy, labial contortions, cerebral exigencies, precocious jeremiads, anathematized pudenda, incipient duplicity, clitoral enthrallment, inveterate nonchalance.... Idiot who poses with open mouth and inaccessible sex dreams penetration. Mornings are a good time, though. Almost invariably wake up with a hard-on. Wasted potential really. Still, there's always the possibility of my luck changing for the better some day. Conquer somebody! Preferable to fantasizing all the frigging time. Cerebral exigencies again, high blood pressure. Think you're going to get a brain haemorrhage, what with all those lewd images flickering through your mind, performing strange rites and requiting unrequited love. Possession of favourite image hardly sufficient for one's bodily salvation, however. Have to do better next time, not let her get away scot-free or get snapped up by somebody else, somebody maybe even worse than myself. Touching hands. Peeling clothes to bring delectable fruit of female's body to lustful exposure. Impending embrace in soft silky night-time, light-time, right-time, sight-time honeymoon. Must sleep, s-l-e-e-p before I go completely crazy. Sleep!

CHAPTER TWO

Gerald Matthews stretched out a hand and switched off the tinny alarm on his pocket-sized alarm clock to prevent it ringing unnecessarily. For he was already wide awake, having anticipated the alarm some fifteen minutes in advance of the 7am deadline at which it was usually set. On this occasion, as on a number of previous ones, it was an inconvenience he might just as well do without!

The practical details of getting up were normally an ordeal for Gerald but, today, the sight of the sun streaming in through a narrow gap in his curtains and the exuberant twittering of local sparrows acted as a kind of invincible goad, and before long he was up and about, frantically hunting for suitable clothes to wear, scrutinizing his stubble-ridden chin in the oval mirror of his dressing-table, and generally making a fuss of himself. When, in this fussy fashion, he had washed and dressed, combed back his curly fair hair and polished his new shoes, he sped downstairs, threw open the front door and, almost skipping out onto the garden path, began to vigorously inhale and exhale large draughts of suburban fresh air. Yes, it was definitely the kind of day to make one feel pleased with life! One just had to be grateful for weather of this magnificent calibre. If the cloudless warmth lasted through to the weekend, he would take himself off somewhere for a long walk.

Sated by his spell of deep breathing, he re-entered the semi-detached house and swiftly made his way towards the kitchen at the rear. However, he hadn't been in there long enough to fry some bacon when a clamber of footsteps above the ceiling indicated that Mr David Shuster, eligible bachelor, lecturer in English, and sole owner of the two-storey property, had risen from the living-death of drug-induced sleep and moronically entered the bathroom, where he would remain for at least another thirty minutes - the fact of his regularly being obliged to contend with the often critical, though sometimes admiring, attention of large numbers of female students having made him, in Gerald's view, somewhat over-solicitous of his facial appearance. Thus by the time Shuster arrived downstairs, impeccably well-groomed, Gerald would be either clearing away the dishes or, assuming he had already done so, reading one of his many music scores in the adjoining study.

As it happened, Gerald had just swallowed his last mouthful of toast and was greedily downing a large mugful of thick, sweetish coffee when

Shuster entered the kitchen and was heard to proffer exuberant salutation, a manner of greeting which Gerald automatically reciprocated, albeit slightly surprised by the other's uncharacteristic early-morning exuberance. "Now don't tell me that you're in a good mood this morning," he hastened to add. "What, exactly, were you dreaming about?"

"Oh, much ado about nothing," Shuster briskly replied with Shakespearean gusto. "It went in a flash as usual." He walked over to the fridge. "Good God, don't tell me we've run out of bacon already!" he cried, peering in.

"On the top shelf," said Gerald, carrying his empty mug and plates to the sink. "I only took two slices this morning."

"Ah, yes." Shuster's hungry eyes alighted on the elusive bacon like a bloodthirsty hawk upon its tender prey. "So how did the music lesson go last night?" he asked, taking command of the frying pan. "I trust you weren't overly exasperated again?"

Gerald Matthews smirked ironically in tacit response to this assumption, since he was only too aware of the cause of his Thursday evening tantrums, and replied that it was fortunate for him that he didn't have to see Lorraine Smith more than once a week, since she had all the traits of an utter wastrel.

"Something of an unwilling piano pupil by the sound of it," conjectured Shuster, turning the sizzling bacon over and adding a couple of small eggs to the rather large frying pan. "You seem to get lumbered with so many like her."

"Yes, and, what's worse I can't get rid of them," Gerald sighed. "Why, she still can't properly differentiate between major and minor diatonic scales!"

"Really?" exclaimed Shuster with apparent unconcern.

"And I've been going over them with her for the past five months!" cried Gerald, patently exasperated. "Her sense of interval recognition is virtually non-existent."

"Dear me," mumbled Shuster, more for his own benefit, it appeared, than for Gerald's. "So you lost your temper again."

"Fortunately not! But I certainly took it out on the piano afterwards. The grand style, so to speak." Gerald thought he detected an involuntary wince on Shuster's clean-shaven face at this point and, transferring his washed crockery to the draining board, tactfully added: "I believe you were out at the time."

"I was indeed. Invited out to dinner, actually."

"Not your eminent colleague, the unmusical physics genius, by any

chance?" conjectured Gerald smirkingly.

Shuster smiled patronizingly as he scooped a well-fried rasher onto an empty plate. It was a standing joke between them that Loper, the physicist, couldn't tell the difference between Mozart and Beethoven, being tone-deaf. "No, not this time," he calmly replied. "Friends of a colleague, in fact. Keen literary minds from down under."

"So you actually had dinner with Australians for once." It was like Gerald to jump to concrete conclusions.

"New Zealanders actually," Shuster corrected. "Though, quite frankly, I wouldn't care to be entertained by them every week. It was a demanding experience, both gastronomically and intellectually. Still, a refreshing change!"

"Glad to hear you say so," said Gerald, who was now ready to depart the kitchen. "Well, I must be off in a minute, since I don't want to arrive at the office later than eight-thirty this morning. Incidentally, there's a literary chap there by name of Michael Savage who might interest you. I made his acquaintance some time ago, but he's certainly an unusually elusive man. Not what I'd call sociable at all.... As it happens, I invited him over here last week, but since then I find it difficult to avoid the impression that he's trying to snub me."

Shuster feigned indignant surprise. "Really? And how old is he?"

"Oh, twenty-three or twenty-four. He did tell me the other day."

"Good grief, don't tell me you belong to that perennially eccentric category of age-forgetters!" exclaimed Shuster with cynical relish.

"Not as completely as I'd like to!" retorted Gerald, whilst admiring his fair countenance in the hall mirror. "I should like to have remained twenty-five for ever."

"Humph! Think yourself fortunate that such wishes are only granted in fairy tales," the lecturer's manly voice boomed from the kitchen. "Else you might have lived to regret it!"

"Not the way I live," the twenty-eight-year-old narcissist shouted back and, with a departing chuckle, he was out through the front door and into the sunny street.

On the tube, Gerald pondered various events of the previous evening's piano tutorials. Like the two occasions, during the second lesson, when he had almost lost his temper with that wretched girl Lorraine Smith, who would never, it seemed to him, come properly to grips with her scales and arpeggios. Of course, her parents were fairly well off and only too keen to help her get on in life, as they say. But, as often happened, the children of

such parents had their own ideas on that score, being disinclined to take seriously those things that they didn't want to take seriously, with a consequence that they not only wasted their parents' money but, in combating parental pressures, simultaneously reduced their own flair for life.

This Lorraine Smith, for example, was fifteen or sixteen (he couldn't quite remember which) and a strapping wench, to boot! For all he knew, she might have been going through the sorts of emotional upheavals which young girls of that age usually experience, and consequently be susceptible to periodic mental aberrations of the kind she often exhibited during her piano lessons. Still, he couldn't be sure and wouldn't have wanted to conjecture presumptuously, for both their sakes! He recalled that midway through the Mozart sonata - a performance, incidentally, with fewer mistakes on her part than during the four previous attempts at it - his eyes had wandered from the score and keyboard to her hair and profile, before encompassing her breasts with a swiftly penetrating glance doubtless encouraged by the low-cut blouse she was wearing, only to return thereafter to the bright ivory keys of his upright piano and refocus on her gracefully tapering fingers. To be sure, he had then summarily corrected a misconstrued interpretation of Mozart's legato indication. For such little sly investigations of this and certain other pupils' physical appearances to which he occasionally succumbed usually had the effect of morally rejuvenating him, and he would undoubtedly have corrected her playing a lot more, had the opportunity of a more leisurely and detailed investigation of her person regularly presented itself. However, as a piano teacher, business had to take precedence over pleasure, since he couldn't afford to jeopardize the sanctity of professional etiquette over some teenage beauty who, in his opinion, still couldn't properly differentiate between major and minor diatonic scales. That would have been an unpardonable indiscretion! Besides, if compensation was desired, he would be instructing Miss Stephanie Power that very evening, and she was even more attractive than Lorraine. He definitely wouldn't mind seeing more of *her*.

Alighting from the half-empty carriage at his usual station, he hurried up the escalator as though it were merely a staircase, dashed, season ticket in hand, past a slightly-bemused ticket collector, and rushed out into the dazzling sunshine of the glorious 25th June. It was a ten-minute walk to the music firm and he would be there in good time if he didn't stop en route, as sometimes happened, for a coffee at the nearby Italian café where, at this time of day, a wait in the queue was almost always guaranteed. Glancing at his watch he decided, in view of the fact it had just turned 8.20am, to

abstain from another coffee until lunch.

Even at this relatively early hour the streets leading to work were thronged with purposefully striding bodies of all shapes and sizes, each of whom was pursuing a secret destiny oblivious of the many other destinies hurrying by to time's pressing dictates. Yet, although he was very much a component of this universal coercion, Gerald had enough presence of mind to note a variety of features - from an old man's white-washed wizened face to a young girl's rather heavily made-up eyes - which engaged his passing attention. He stopped briefly twice en route to stare, firstly, through the window of a small music shop with many bright covers of topical and even post-topical songbooks on display, and, secondly, at an array of saucepans and other domestic utensils in a nearby general store - an experience which instantly connoted with the fact that Michael Savage was leaving the firm today. For they had visited this particular store together just over a week previously, and on that august occasion Savage had divulged his intention of leaving while Gerald had been closely examining a large baking tray, an item he reluctantly but stoically purchased the following day.

So much for the facts! At any rate, it was up to Gerald to seize upon the occasion of his colleague's imminent departure by inviting him for a drink and/or meal at lunch time, thereby acquiring the opportunity for an exchange of mutual intentions and problems, as well as possibly even securing ongoing access to his colleague's potential friendship - assuming, of course, that that was mutually acceptable. However, the recollection that he wanted to be at the office by 8.30am immediately precluded any further dalliance on his part, and he set off, once more, at a fairly brisk pace. It was now 8.27 and he would certainly have to hurry if, in accordance with the rules of flexitime, he wanted to leave work at 4.30pm that day. He was so looking forward to seeing his star pupil, Miss Stephanie Power, again!

CHAPTER THREE

'Phew! I'd better open that window and let-in some fresh air,' thought Michael Savage, getting up from his desk and going across to the nearest window. 'That's better! No wonder people fall asleep on the job. Too stuffy for clear thinking.... Well, I couldn't ask for a better day to be leaving this place. Such a cloudless sky must be a good omen. The twenty-fifth of June, effectively my D-Day!'

Returning to his desk, he cast a furtive glance around the elongated office in which it had been his fate to labour in various clerical capacities for the past five-and-a-half years, before continuing: 'Eight-thirty and still not many people here. Even old Gerald hasn't arrived yet. Just as well I got out of bed on time this morning. Being here at eight-twenty is early for me.' He turned his eyes towards the young clerk at the desk opposite, a comparative newcomer to the clerical scene, and encountered an impassive gaze, the gaze of reticent youth which, however, he sought to investigate by tentatively smiling upon, the youth duly reciprocating this smile in an equally tentative manner, thereby reassuring him of the latter's shyness or perhaps even deference. On more than one occasion in recent weeks Michael had been disconcerted and almost intimidated by this adolescent's impassivity, this enigmatic judgement which rarely exposed itself to close scrutiny, although he subsequently dismissed the accusations he had hypothetically, and some would say pathetically, levelled against himself on the grounds that he had as much right to live as anyone else, even if he was occasionally a little paranoid, and that the youth, far from holding himself critically aloof from someone he despised, was probably uncertain of himself and, hence, fairly noncommittal. That, at any rate, seemed as plausible a conjecture as any!

'At least old grumpy guts won't be in for a while,' Michael resumed, thinking of the more experienced clerk who sat beside the one in question, as he turned the pages of a recent reprint of the G.B. and Channel Islands rail guide through which he was obliged to investigate the routes and times of the various intercity services the more important representatives of the firm would be obliged to utilize, in due course, for purposes best known to themselves. 'So many stations in these things. I'd better make sure I keep a close check on the days of the week to which I'm referring. It wouldn't do to put someone who'll be working Saturday onto a Sunday service! Also

refer to period validity. Make sure the timetable is still operative. Some of them don't begin to apply until the tenth of October. It keeps your mind alert anyway.'

At that moment a smartly-dressed, portfolio-bearing clerk of average height, but slightly more than medium build, threw open the office door with a flourish and proceeded, at brisk pace, towards the Signing-in-Book at the far end of the room. He politely smiled at two nearby clerks before casting a glance at the newly-installed electric wall clock, which appeared to hover above the Signing-in-Book like a vulture over a carcass.

'Ah, there's Gerald now! Eight-thirty three, eh? He's a bit late this morning... What-on-earth's he done to his hair? It looks a different colour today. Maybe it's down to some fancy shampoo he uses. He's growing a beard it seems. Suits him anyway. Looks slightly more like a man now. Always did strike me as being a bit effeminate. Wonder if he'll say hello.'

"Morning, Michael!"

"Morning, Gerald." - 'Christ, that surprised me! He hasn't been so friendly since I cold-shouldered him last week. Has probably changed his attitude on account of my imminent departure.' - "How did the piano lessons go last night?" Michael hastened to inquire of him. "I trust you weren't too tired after yesterday's initiation into that job I gave you?"

Having removed his summer jacket and rearranged the contents of his rather pretentious-looking black-leather portfolio, which included a sheet of music, a small packet of paper tissues, a wad of writing paper, and a pack of envelopes, Gerald Matthews abandoned his desk and, as though to shield his reply from potentially malevolent ears, replied, sotto voce, that the lessons in question hadn't gone too badly, that yesterday afternoon's ...