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# BOOK ONE



## MAKING COFFEE

*It starts with a dream . . .*

It starts with a dream. This story, which can start everywhere and nowhere like a circle, starts, for me – and it is after all, my story and no one else's, never could be anyone else's but mine – it starts with a dream I dreamed one night in May.

The wildest kind of dream. Jane was in it, stiff and starchy as a hotel napkin. He was there too. I didn't recognise him of course. I hardly knew him then. Just an old man to nod to in the street or smile through a politely held library door. The dream rejuvenated him, transformed him from boneless, liver-spotted old beardy into Mack Sennet barman with drooping black moustache, tacked to a face hang-dog long and white with under-nourishment.

His face, for all that. Not that I knew it then.

In this dream he was in the lab with Jane: Jane's lab, of course – the dream was not prophetic enough to foretell the dimensions of his lab, which I only got to know later – that is if the dream was prophetic at all, which it may well not have been. If you get me.

This is going to be hard.

Anyway, she was peering into a microscope and he was feeling her up from behind. He stroked between her



thighs inside the long white coat. She was taking no notice, but I was outraged, outraged when the soft veef of hands rubbing nylon stopped and I knew that his fingers had reached the uppermost part of her long legs, the place where stocking ended and soft hot private flesh – hot private flesh belonging to me – began.

‘Leave her alone!’ I called from some unseen director’s corner, behind, as it were, the dream’s camera.

He gazed up at me with sad eyes that held me, as they always do, in the bright beam of their blue. Or always subsequently *did*, because I had, in my real waking life at that point, never so much as exchanged a single word with him.

‘*Wachet auf*,’ he says.

And I obey.

Strong light of a May morning whitening the dirty cream of cruddy curtains that we meant to change months ago.

‘Morning, babe,’ I murmur. ‘Double Gloucester . . . my mother always said cheese dreams.’

But she’s not there. Jane that is, not my mother. My mother isn’t there either as a matter of fact. Certainly not. It absolutely isn’t that kind of story.

Jane’s half of the bed is cold. I strain my ears for the hissing of the shower or the crack of teacups banged clumsily on the draining-board. Everything Jane does, outside of work, she does clumsily. She has this habit of turning her head away from her hands, like a squeamish student nurse picking up a raw appendix. The hand holding a cigarette end, for instance, might stretch leftwards

## *Making History*

to an ashtray, while she will look off to the right, grinding the butt into a saucer, a book, a tablecloth, a plate of food. I have always found uncoordinated women, near-sighted women, long, gawky, awkward women, powerfully attractive.

I have started to wake up now. The last granules of the dream fizz away and I am ready for the morning puzzle of self-reinvention. I stare at the ceiling and remember what there is to remember.

\*

We will leave me lying there for the moment, reassembling myself. I am not entirely sure that I am telling this story the right way round. I have said that it is like a circle, approachable from any point. It is also, like a circle, *un*approachable from any point.

History is my business.

What a way to start . . . history isn't my *business* at all. I managed, at least, to stop myself from describing history as my 'trade', for which I reckon I can award myself some points. History is my passion, my calling. Or, to be more painfully truthful, it is my field of least incompetence. It is what, for the time being, I do. Had I the patience and the discipline I should have chosen literature. But, while I can read *Middlemarch* and *The Dunciad* or, I don't know, Julian Barnes or Jay McInerney say, as happily as anyone, I have this little region missing in my brain, that extra lobe that literature students possess as a matter of course, the lobe that allows them the detachment and the nerve to talk about books (*texts* they will say) as others might

talk about the composition of a treaty or the structure of a cell. I can remember at school how we would read together in class an Ode by Keats, a Shakespeare sonnet or a chapter of *Animal Farm*. I would tingle inside and want to sob, just at the words, at nothing more than the simple progression of sounds. But when it came to writing that thing called an Essay, I flubbed and floundered. I could never discover where to *start*. How do you find the distance and the cool to write in an academically approved style about something that makes you spin, wobble and weep?

I remember that child in the Dickens novel, *Hard Times* I think it is, the girl who had grown up with carnival people, spending her days with horses, tending them, feeding them, training them and loving them. There's a scene where Gradgrind (it is *Hard Times*, I've just looked it up) is showing off his school to a visitor and asks this girl to define 'horse' and of course the poor scrap dries up completely, just stutters and fumbles and stares hopelessly in front of her like a mong.

'Girl number twenty unable to define a horse!' Gradgrind says and turns with a great sneer to the smart little weasel, Bitzer, a cocksure street kid who's probably never dared so much as pat a horse in his life, gets a kick out of throwing stones at them I expect. This little runt stands up with a smirk and comes out pat with 'Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth . . .' and so on, to wild applause and admiration.

'Now girl number twenty you know what a horse is,' says Gradgrind.

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Well, each time I was asked to write an essay at school, with a title like 'Wordsworth's *Prelude* is the Egotism without the Sublime: Discuss' I felt, when I got back my paper marked E or F or whatever, as if *I* were the stuttering horse-lover and the rest of the class, with their As and Bs were the smart-arsed parroting runts who had lost their souls. You could only write successfully about books and poems and plays if you didn't care, really care, about them. Hysterical schoolboy wank, for sure, an attitude compounded of nothing but egotism, vanity and cowardice. But how deeply felt. I went through all my schooldays convinced of this, that 'literary studies' were no more than a series of autopsies performed by heartless technicians. Worse than autopsies: *biopsies*. Vivisection. Even movies, which I love more than anything, more than life itself, they even do it with movies these days. You can't talk about movies now without a *methodology*. Once they start offering courses, you know the field is dead. History, I found, was safer ground for me: I didn't *love* Rasputin or Talleyrand or Charles the Fifth or Kaiser Bill. Who could? A historian has the pleasant luxury of being able to point out, from the safety of his desk, where Napoleon ballsed up, how this revolution might have been avoided, that dictator toppled or those battles won. I found I could be most marvellous dispassionate with history, where everyone, by definition, is truly dead. Up to a point. Which brings us round to the telling of this tale.

As a historian I should be able to offer a good plain account of the events that took place on the . . . well,

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when *did* they take place? It is all highly debatable. When you become more familiar with the story you will understand the huge problems that confront me. A historian, someone said – Burke, I think, if not Burke then Carlyle – is a prophet looking backwards. I cannot approach my story in that fashion. The puzzle that besets me is best expressed by the following statements.

*A: None of what follows ever happened*

*B: All of what follows is entirely true*

Get your head round that one. It means that it is my job to tell you the true story of what never happened. Perhaps that's a definition of fiction.

I admit that this preamble must look rather tricky: I get as snortingly impatient as the next man when authors draw attention to their writerly techniques, and this sentence itself disappears even more deeply than most into the filthy elastic of its own narrative rectum, but there's nothing I can do about that.

I saw a play the other week (plays are nothing to films, nothing. Theatre is dead but sometimes I like to go and watch the corpse decompose) in which one of the characters said something like this, she said that the truth about things was like a bowl of fish-hooks: you try to examine one little truth and the whole lot comes out in a black and vicious bunch. I can't allow that to happen here. I have to do some unfastening and untangling, so that if the hooks do all come out in one go, they might at least emerge neatly linked, like a chain of paperclips.

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I feel then that I can confidently enough begin with this little series of connections: if it weren't for a rotted clasp, an alphabetical adjacency and the predictably vile, thirst-making hangovers to which Alois was subject, then I would have nothing to tell you. So we may as well start at the point I have already claimed (and disclaimed) to be the beginning.

There I lie, wondering like Keats, Was it a vision, or a waking dream? Fled is that music, do I wake or sleep? Wondering too, why the Christ Jane isn't coiled warmly beside me.

The clock tells me why.

It's a quarter to nine.

She's never done this to me before. Never.

I rush to the bathroom and rush out again, toothpaste dribbling down the corners of my mouth.

'Jane!' I bubble. 'Jane, what the pants is going on? It's half-past nine!'

In the kitchen I snap on the kettle and frenzy around for coffee, sucking my peppermint fluoride lips in panic. An empty bag of Kenco and boxes and boxes and boxes of teas.

Raspberry Rendezvous for God's sake. *Rendezvous?* Orange Dazzler. Banana and Liquorice Dream. Night-time Delight.

Jesus, what is it with her? Every tea but tea tea. And not a bean or bag of coffee to be had.

At the back of the cupboard . . . triumph, glory. Mwah! A big Aquafresh kiss for *you*, my darling.

'Safeway Colombian Coffee, Fine Ground for Filters.'

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All *right!*

Back to the bedroom, hopping into cut-off denim. No time for boxers, no time for socks. Bare feet jammed into boat shoes, laces later.

Into the kitchen again just as the kettle thumps itself off, bit of a hiss from so little water, but enough for a cup, easily enough for a cup.

*No!*

Oh damn it, no!

No, no, no, no, *no!*

Bitch. Sow. Cow. Angel. Double-bitch. Sweetness. Slag.

'Jane!'

'Safeway Colombian Coffee, Fine Ground For Filters: *Naturally Decaffeinated.*'

'Pants!'

Calm, Michael. Calm. *Bleib ruhig, mein Sohn.*

I can keep it together. I'm a graduate. A *soon-to-be-doctored* graduate. I won't be beaten by this. Not a little nonsense like this.

Ha! Gotcha! Lightbulb-over-the-head, finger-snapping eureka, who's a clever boy? *Yes . . .*

Those pills, those pep pills. Pro-Doze? No-Doze? Something like that.

Skidding into the bathroom, my brain half-registers something. An important fact. Something amiss. Put it to one side. Time enough later.

Where they go? Where they *go?*

*Here* you are, you little buggers . . . yes, come to Mama . . .

'No-Doze. Stay alert. Ideal for exam revision, late

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nights, driving etc. Each pill contains 50mg caffeine.'

At the kitchen sideboard, like a London cokehead giggling in a night-club toilet, I crush and grind and chop.

The chunks of white pop and wink in the coffee mud as I pour the boiling water on.

'Safeway Colombian Coffee, Fine Ground For Filters: *Unnaturally Recaffeinated.*'

Now *that's* coffee. A tadlet bitter perhaps, but real coffee, not Strawberry Soother or Nettle 'n' Camomile tisane. And you say I have no gumption, Jane hun? Ha! Wait till I tell you about *this* tonight. I outdid Paul Newman in *Harper*. All he did was recycle an old filter paper, yeah?

A quarter to ten. Teaching at eleven. No panic. I stalk comfortably now, mug in hand into the spare room, quite in charge. Bloody showed *her*.

The Apple is cold. A nannyng humming nag no more. Who knows when I may condescend to turn you on again, Maccie Thatcher?

And there, on the desk, neatly squared, magnificently, obscenely thick, *Das Meisterwerk* itself.

I keep my distance, just craning forward; we cannot allow even the  *tiniest* drop of recaff to stain the glorious title page.

From Brunau to Vienna:  
The Roots of Power

Michael Young, MA MPhil



Stephen Fry

Way-hey! Four years. Four years and two hundred thousand words. There's that bastard keyboard, so plastically dumb, so comically vacuous.

QWERTYUIOPASDFGHJKLZXCVBNM1234567890

Nothing else to choose from. Just those ten numbers and twenty-six letters permuted into two hundred thousand words, a comma here and a semi colon there. Yet for a sixth part of my life, a whole *sixth* of my life, by big beautiful Buddha, that keyboard clawed at me like cancer.

Fiff-ha-hoo! Bit of a stretch and there's the morning workout.

I sigh with pleasure and drift back to the kitchen. The 150mg of caffeine has hit the ground running and breasted the blood-brain barrier with arms upraised. I am now awake. Pumpingly A-wake.

Yes, I am now awake. Awake to everything.

Awake to What Was Wrong in the bathroom.

Awake to a piece of paper leaning up between the heel of last night's cheese and the empty wine-bottle in the centre of the kitchen table.

Awake to the reason that at eight on the tit I was not, as I should have been, awake.

*Let's face it, Pup. It's not working. I'll call back for the rest of my things later today. We'll sort out how much I owe you for the car. Congratulations on your thesis. Think about it for a while and you'll know I'm right. J.*

Even as I feel myself go through the necessary shock, rage and howls, a part of me registers relief, does instantly register relief, or if not relief an awareness certainly that

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this elegant little note accesses a smaller and less significant proportion of my emotions than have done the earlier absence of coffee or the possibility that I might have been allowed to oversleep or most especially now, the casual, the arrogant assumption that *my* car shall go to her.

The explosion of fury then, is mostly for form's sake, a kind of compliment to Jane in fact. The hurling of the wine-bottle – *the* wine-bottle, the celebratory wine-bottle, the wine-bottle I had so carefully chosen at Oddbins the night before, the Chateauneuf du Pape that I had worked towards for a sixth part of my whole life – is a gesture therefore, a necessary theatrical acknowledgement that the ending of our three years together has earned at least some noise and some spectacle.

When she returns for her 'things' she will spy the elegant curved streak of rusty sediment along the kitchen wall and her big feet will crunch on the glass and she will derive some satisfaction from believing that I 'cared' and that will be that. Jane&Michael have ceased to be and now there is Jane and there is Michael and Michael is, at last, Somebody. Somebody, as Lennon would have it, in his own Write.

So.

In the study, picking up the *Meisterwerk*, weighing it in my hands, ready to push it delicately into my briefcase, I suddenly goggle, with Roger Rabbit starting eyes to the accompaniment of a loud klaxon, at a small speck on the title page: it has erupted from nowhere like an old surfer's melanoma, just in the short time I was in the

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kitchen hurling wine-bottles. It's not a spot of coffee, I am sure of that, perhaps just a flaw in the paper that only the strong May sunlight can expose. No time to boot up the computer and reprint, so I snatch a bottle of Liquid Paper, touch the tip of the brush to this naughty little freckle and blow gently.

Holding the paper by the edges I go outside and hold it against the sun. It is enough. 'Twill serve.

There by the telegraph pole is the space where the Renault should be.

'You *bitch!*'

Oh dear. Bad move.

'Sorry!'

Little delivery girl veers and races away, thrust over the handlebars remembering every terrible story she ever glimpsed on the front of the newspapers she daily dumps onto the doormats. Telling mummy on you.

Oh dear. Better give her time or she'll think I'm following and that won't do. I don't know why we have to have a newspaper delivery in the first place. Jane is a newspaper junkie, that's the fact of the matter. We even get the *Cambridge Evening News* delivered. Every afternoon. I mean, please.

I turn and wheel out the bicycle from the passageway. The ticking of the wheels pleases me. Hell, I am young. I am free. My teeth are clean. In my noble old school briefcase there nestles a future. Nestles *the* future. The sun shines. To hell with everything else.

# MAKING BREAKFAST

## *The smell of the rats*

Alois swung into the saddle, shifted the knapsack over his shoulders and began to pump rhythmically up the hill, the green stripes on his uniform trousers and the golden eagle on his helmet flashing in the sun. Klara, watching him go, wondered why he never stood in the pedals to give himself impetus, as children do. Always with him the same absolutely mechanical, frighteningly regular, purposefully subdued action.

She had risen at five to light the stove and scrub the kitchen table before the maid was awake. She always felt the need to purge the table of wine stains and the sticky pools of schnapps and shards of broken glass. As if hoping perhaps that the sight of a clean table might make Alois forget how much he had drunk the night before. Nor did she ever want the children to see the ruins of their father's 'little evenings in'.

When the maid Anna rose at six she had sniffed, as always, at the sight of the clean table and her wrinkled nose had seemed to say to Klara, behind Alois's back, as he buffed his boots before the stove, 'I know *you*. We're the same. *You* were a maid too once. Not even a housemaid. Just a kitchen maid. And inside that's what you still are and always will be.'

Klara, as ever, had watched her husband polish away, envying the love and detail and pride he invested in his uniform. Lulled by the swinging rhythm of brush on leather she had, as ever, wished herself back at Spital with its fields and milk-pails and silage smell, back with her brothers and sisters and their children, away from the respectability, the stiffness, the brutality of Uncle Alois and uniforms and people whose conversations and conventions she could not understand.

Uncle Alois! He had forbidden her ever to call him that again.

'I am not your Uncle, girl. A cousin by marriage at most. You will not call me uncle. Understood?' But when talking to herself she could not help it. Uncle Alois he had always been, and Uncle Alois he would always remain.

The night before he had been no more drunk than usual, no more violent, no more abusive, no more insulting. Always with him the same absolutely mechanical, frighteningly regular, purposefully subdued action.

When she was being hurt she never made enough noise to awaken Angela and Little Alois for she could not bear the idea that they knew what their father was doing to her. Klara was not an intelligent woman, but she was sensitive and she understood that her stepchildren would feel not sorrow but only contempt for her if they knew she submitted so spiritlessly to their father's beatings. She was after all, and what a ridiculous fact it was, closer in age to the children than to Alois. That is why, she supposed, he was so determined to have children by her. He wanted to age her, to turn her from a silly country girl into a Mother.

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Remove the smell of silage. Get some fat on her, some substance, some respectability. Oh, he loved respectability. But then, he was a bastard. It was the one thing she had over him. She may have been a silly country girl, but at least she knew who her father was. Uncle Alois the Bastard did not. Yet she wanted his children too. How desperately she wanted them.

Three years earlier their son Gustav had died after just a week of blue, coughing life. The next year a little girl was stillborn and just a year ago the baby Josef had struggled, plucky as a game-cock, for a month before he too was taken. That was when the beatings began. Uncle Bastard had bought a hippopotamus whip and hung it on the wall with a terrible smile.

'This is Pnina,' he said. '*Pnina die Pietsche*. Pnina the Whip, our new child.'

Klara stood now by the door and watched the upright uniformed figure reach the top of the hill. Only Alois could make such a ridiculous machine as a bicycle seem dignified. And how he loved it. Every new development in patent tyres and pedals and chains excited him. Yesterday he had read out excitedly to little Alois from a newspaper. In Mannheim an engineer called Benz had built a three-wheeled machine that travelled at fifteen kilometres an hour without human effort, without horses, without steam.

'Imagine that, my boy! Like a private little train that needs no tracks! One day *we* shall have such a self-propelled machine and travel together to Linz or Vienna like princes.'

Klara turned back into the house and watched Anna frying eggs for the children.

‘Let me do that,’ she wanted to say. She knew how to stop herself now, so she moved instead with quick guilt towards the empty pail by the back door, feeling rather than seeing Anna turn at the squeak of the bucket handle.

‘Let *me* . . .’ Anna began, but Klara was outside and the kitchen door shut before the whining sentence could be finished.

Klara realised with amusement that she had, as so often, timed her visit to the pump to coincide with the passing of the Innsbruck train. She imagined its earlier progress through meadows and farms and watched, in her mind’s eye, her nephews and nieces in Spital jumping up and down and waving to the driver. She pushed down the handle more quickly and forced the water to plunge into the bucket in just the rhythm of the mighty locomotive as it pushed its imperial white moustaches into the sky.

And then the smell. Oh my God the *smell*.

Klara clapped a hand to her mouth and nose. But to no avail. Vomit leaked from between her fingers as her body tried to force out the reek, the terrible, terrible stench. Death and corruption filled the air.

# MAKING GOOD

## *Parks*

It had been a big error to have neglected socks. By the time I passed the Mill my feet were sweaty and bruised. As, when it came down to it, was I.

First years, as I pounded wearily over the bridge along Silver Street, bubbled merrily, skipping to avoid the traffic and exhibiting that blend of world-weariness and bragging bounce that is their foolish birthright. I could never do all that when I was an undergraduate. Too self-conscious. That way the studentry have of calling out each other's names across the street.

'Lucius! D'you go to that party in the end?'

'Kate!'

'Dave!'

'Mark, catchalater, guy!'

'Bridget, woah, *babe!*'

If I weren't part of it all I'd puke.

I remembered a huge piece of graffiti along Downing Street, done round about the time of the collapse of Communism and still defiantly and screamingly legible on the brickwork of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.



Stephen Fry

THE WALL IS NOT COMING DOWN HERE.  
KILLAGRAD 85

You could hardly blame any kid who grew up in Cambridge for redesigning himself as a class warrior. Imagine being surrounded your whole life through by all those floppy-haired Fabians and baseball-capped Brians with money and complexions and money and height and money and looks and money and books and money and money. Wankers.

Wank-us! The class warriors shouted at you in football crowd chorus. Wank-uss! With accompanying hand gestures.

Killagrad 85. The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology should restore that faded lettering and treasure it as their most prized acquisition, an al fresco exhibit saying more than all their collections of plinthed Celtic amulets, spotlight Incan jars and Borneo nose bones.

A colleague in Oxford (how wonderful to be a graduate, a Junior Bye Fellow and to be able to use words like 'colleague') a colleague, yes a *colleague*, a Fellow Historian, told me about a photograph he saw on show in a gallery there. It was really two photographs, side by side, of two different bottle-banks, for the recycling of glass. The picture on the left was taken in Cowley, on the outskirts of the town, near the car factory. This bottle-bank was, as most are I guess, built in three sections, colour-coded to represent the three varieties of glass destined for each bin. There was a section painted white for clear glass, a green section for green and, three times

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the width of the other two, a brown section. The photograph next to it, which at first glance you thought was identical, showed another bottle-bank, but taken this time in the centre of Oxford, the university quarter. After a puzzled look, the difference hit you. A white section, a brown section and, get this, three times the width of the other two, a *green* section. What else do you need to know about the world? They should screen that photograph of those two bottle-banks at closedown while the national anthem plays.

Not that I'm from a generation that gets angry at social injustice, everyone knows our lot don't care. I mean bloody hell, it's get-a-job city here and the devil take the wimp-most. Besides, I'm a historian. A historian, me. *An* historian if you please.

I sat up, folded my arms and freewheeled past the University Press humming an Oily-Moily number.

*I'll never be a woman  
I'll never be you*

I must have lost count of how many bicycles I'd been through in the last seven years. This model, as it happened, was balanced enough to allow me to take my hands from the handlebars, which is a waycool thing I like to do.

Bicycle theft at Cambridge is like car-radio theft in London or handbag snatching in Florence: which is to say en-bloody-demic. Every bike has a number elegantly and uselessly painted on its rear mudguard. There was even a time, which ought to have been humiliating for

the town, when they tried a Scheme. God save us from all Schemes, yeah? The town fathers bought thousands of bicycles, sprayed them green and left them in little bike-parks all over the city. The idea was that you hopped on one, got to where you wanted to be and then left it on the street for the next user. *Such* a cute idea, so William Morris, so Utopian, so dumb.

Reader, you will be *amazed* to hear, *astonished* you will be, *thunderstruck* to learn, that within a week all the green bicycles had disappeared. Every single one. There was something so cute and trusting and hopeful and noble and aaaah! in the Scheme that the city ended up prouder, not humbler, for the deal. We giggled. And, when the council announced a new improved Scheme, we rolled over on the ground howling with laughter, begging them between gasps to stop.

Trouble is, you can't blade in Cambridge, too many cobbles. There's a sad little In-Line Skating Soc and a Quad Soc which tries to pretend that Midsummer Common is Central Park, but it won't wash, kids. Bikes it has to be and mountain bikes – in the flattest region of Britain, where a dog-turd excites the attentions of the Mountaineering Soc – they won't wash either.

Cambridge councillors love the word 'park'. It is the one thing you can't actually do in the town, so they use the word everywhere. Cambridge was just about the first place ever to offer Park 'n' Ride buses. It boasts a Science Park, Business Parks and of course the late lamented Bike Parks. I shouldn't wonder if by the turn of the century we have Sex Parks and Internet Parks and Shop Parks

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and perhaps, as a wild throw, Park Parks with swings and slides.

You can't park in Cambridge for a number of reasons. It is a small medieval town, whose street widths are delimited by the lines of colleges facing each other, resolute and immovable as a chain of mountains. It becomes, in vacation months, *stuffed* with tourists, foreign students and conventioners. Above all, it is the capital city of the Fens, the only serious shopping centre for hundreds of thousands from Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, Hertfordshire, Suffolk and Norfolk, poor sods. In May however, in May, Cambridge belongs to the undergraduacy, to all the young dudes in their little scrubby goat-ees and neat sideburns. The colleges close their gates and one word rises above the centre of town, and swells to bursting like a huge water-filled balloon.

Revision.

Cambridge in May is Revision Park. The river and lawns, libraries, courts and corridors bloom with colourful young buds busting their brains over books. Panic, real panic, of a kind they never knew until the 1980s, washes over the third years like a tide. Examinations matter. The class of degree *counts*.

Unless, like me, you did your final exams years ago, swotted like a specky, got a First, have completed your doctoral thesis and are now free.

Free! I shouted to myself.

Fur-reee! answered the coasting bike and the build-ings whip-panning by.

God, I loved myself that day.

## Stephen Fry

Enjoy the itch and bruise of your feet on the pedals. What the heckety have you got to be down about? How many, like you, can stand up and call themselves free?

Free of Jane too. Still not quite sure what I felt about that. I mean, I have to admit she was, as it happens, my first ever real girlfriend. I was never like, one of the great and groovy studmuffins of the world as a student because . . . well, there's no getting round it . . . I'm shy. I find it hard to meet people's eyes. As my mother used to say of me (and in front of me) 'he blushes in company you know'. That helped, obviously.

I was only seventeen when I started at Uni, and being baby-faced and blushy and not confident with *anybody*, let alone girls, I kind of kept myself to myself. I didn't have school friends already there because I went to a state school that had never sent anyone to Cambridge before and I was crap at sports and journalism and acting and all the things that get you noticed. Crap at them *because* they get you noticed, I suppose. No, let's be honest, crap at them because I was crap at them. So Jane was . . . well, she was my life.

But now, way-hey! If I could complete a doctorate in four years and personally recaffeinate Safeway's natural decaff, I didn't need anyone.

Every Fiona and Frances frowning over her Flaubert looked different to the new, free me as I freewheeled and freely dismounted at the gates of St Matthew's and wheeled the freely ticking 4857M into the lodge, feeling free.

# MAKING NEWS

## *We Germans*

Alois pushed his bicycle through the gates and into the lodge.

*'Grüß Gott!'*

Klingermann's cheeriness on these inspection visits always irritated him. The man was supposed to be nervous.

*'Gott,'* he mumbled, somewhere between a greeting and an oath.

'All quiet this morning. Herr Sammer sent a message on the telephone machine to say he couldn't come in today. A summer cold.'

'Well, it wouldn't be a winter cold in July, would it, boy?'

'No, sir!' twinkled Klingermann, taking this to be a good joke, which irritated Alois more. And this fear of the telephone, calling it *Das Telefon Ding*, as though it were not the Future, but some demonic apparatus sent to perplex. Peasant attitude. Peasant attitudes were what held this country back.

Alois walked coldly past Klingermann, sat at the desk, took a newspaper and a bottle of schnapps from his knapsack and settled down to read.

'I beg pardon, sir?' said Klingermann.

Alois ignored him and threw the paper aside. He had only barked the one word *scheiße*! He took a good pull of schnapps and gazed out of the window across the border poles and into Bavaria, into *Germany*, he begged its fucking pardon. Germany, where in Mannheim even now they were perfecting horseless transportation. Where they were building telephone networks to stretch across the nation and where that swine Bismarck was going to get what was coming to him.

'We Germans fear God and nothing else in the world,' the Old Pig had blustered in the Reichstag, expecting the Russians and French to pee in their pants at the might of his fancy Triple Alliance. 'We Germans!' What the hell was that supposed to mean? Conniving bastard, with his Danish wars and his you-can't-join-in tongue stuck out at Austria. 'We Germans' were only what the Old Pig decided. Prussians. Shit-faced junkers. *They* decided. Westphalians could be Germans, oh yes. Hessians, Hamburgers, Thuringians and Saxons could be Germans. Even fucking *Bavarians* could be Germans. But not Austrians. Oh no. They could slum it with the Czechs and the Slavs and the Magyars and the Serbs. I mean, wasn't it obvious, obvious even to an *Arschloch* like Bismarck, that the Austrians and the Germans had . . . oh, what was the use? It didn't matter now, the Old Pig was going to get his.

Piss-faced Wilhelm had been dead for weeks now, the mourning was over and Friedrich-Wilhelm was on the throne. Friedrich-Wilhelm and Bismarck detested each other, ha-ha! Goodbye Iron Chancellor! Good shitting riddance, Old Pig. Your days are numbered.

## *Making History*

A cart was moving towards them. Alois rose and straightened his tunic. He hoped it was a Bavarian and not a returning Austrian. A *German*. Whenever he came out to inspect a frontier post he loved to give *Germans* a hard time.



# MAKING READY

## *The pigeon-hole*

Bill the Porter looked up from his window as I struggled in with the bike. I had suspected for a long time that he disapproved of me.

‘Morning, Mr Young.’

‘Not for long, Bill.’

He looked puzzled. ‘Forecast’s good.’

‘Not “Mister” for long,’ I said with a small blushing smile and held up the briefcase that housed the *Meisterwerk*. ‘I’ve finished my thesis!’

‘Ho,’ said Bill and looked back down at his desk.

Too much to expect him to take pleasure in my triumph. Who will ever penetrate the embarrassment of the late twentieth-century servant-master relationship? Even to call it a servant-master relationship is going a bit far. The porters had their Sirs, Ma’ams and bowler hats and we had the foolish, hearty and sycophantic grins that tried to make up for it all. We would never know what they called us behind our backs. They, presumably, would never know what we actually got up to all day. Perhaps it was the porters’ sons and daughters who wrote *Killagrad* 85 up on walls. Bill knew that some students stayed on, wrote doctoral theses and became fellows of the college, just as he knew that others flunked or went

## *Making History*

into the world to become rich, famous or forgotten. Maybe he cared, maybe he didn't. Still, a bit more of Denholm Elliott in *Trading Places* and a bit less of Judith Anderson in *Rebecca* would have been welcome. I mean, you know? Yeah? Exactly.

'Of course,' I said weighing the briefcase in my hands with what I hoped was rueful modesty, 'it has to be examined first . . .'

A grunt was all I got out of that, so I turned to see what the post had brought me. A thick yellow parcel was poking from my pigeon-hole. Cool! I pulled it out tenderly.

Printed on the address label was the logo of a German publishing house that specialised in history and academic texts. Seligmanns Verlag. I knew their name well from research, but how the hey could they know *my* name? I'd never written to them. It seemed very odd. I certainly hadn't ordered any books from them . . . unless of course, somehow, by reputation they *had* heard of me and were writing to ask if I would consent to their publishing my *Meisterwerk*. Coo-ooool!

For my thesis to be published was naturally the greatest, deepest, dearest, closest wish of my entire bosom. Seligmanns Verlag, woah, this was going to be a peach of a day.

Whole dreams, visions and imaginative constructions of the future were building inside my head like time-lapsed film of skyscraper construction; timbers and king-posts, girders and joists winking into place to a cheeky xylophone track. I was already there, in the fully

furnished and fully let Michael Young Tower, accepting awards and professorships and signing elegantly produced Seligmanns Verlag copies of my thesis (I could even see the colour of the book, the typeface, the jacket illustration and the dignified author photo and blurb) in the infinitesimal fraction of time between first seeing their label on the parcel and subsequently registering, with a squeal of brakes, a screeching of tyres and a billowing of airbags, the name of the actual addressee. Bit of a metaphorical shit heap there, but you know what I mean.

‘Professor L H Zuckermann’, it said. ‘St Matthew’s College, Cambridge. CB3 9BX.’

Oh. Not Michael Young MA, then.

I looked at the pigeon-hole immediately beneath mine. It was crammed to overflowing with letters, flyers and notes. Alphabetically the last, below even ‘Young, Mr M D’ came ‘Zuckermann, Prof’. I stared at the dymo label, hot with disappointment.

‘Damn,’ I said, trying to wedge the package into its proper home.

‘Sir?’

‘Oh, nothing. It’s just that there’s this thing in my pigeon-hole for Professor Zuckermann and his pigeon-hole’s full.’

‘If you’ll give it to me, sir, I’ll see that he gets it.’

‘It’s all right, I’ll take it to him. He might be able to help me with . . . with an introduction to some publishers. Where’s he hang out?’

‘Hawthorn Tree Court, sir. 2A.’

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‘Who is he, in fact?’ I asked, sliding the package into my briefcase. ‘Never come across him.’

‘He is Professor Zuckermann,’ was the prim reply. Officialdom. Tch.

# MAKING TROUBLE

## *Diabolo*

‘But I am a German!’

‘No, you are nothing. These papers tell me you are nothing. Nothing at all. You do not exist.’

‘One day! They are out of date by *one day*, that is all.’

‘Sir, this gentleman comes through all the time,’ Klingermann gave Alois an uncomfortable look. ‘He is . . . he is well known to me. I can vouch for him.’

‘Oh, you can *vouch* for him, can you Klingermann? And why do you think the Imperial Government in Vienna spends a fortune every month on papers, stamps, passports and *vouchers*, then? For fun? What do you think a *voucher* is? It is a stamped piece of paper to be carried around at all times, legitimising the bearer. Or does this non-existent citizen of nowhere imagine that he will carry *you* around as his voucher?’

‘But as a German, I am allowed free passage into Austria!’

‘But you are not a German. You may have been, from these papers, a German yesterday. But today, today you are no one and nothing.’

‘I have a living to make, a family to support!’

‘I have a living to make, a family to support . . . ?’

‘I have a living to make, a family to support, *sir*.’

‘So have Austrian carpenters a living to make and fami-

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lies to support, sir! For every one of these tawdry pieces of German crap that is bought here, bread is taken from the mouth of an Austrian carpenter.'

'Sir, with respect, they are not pieces of crap, they are toys, handmade with love and with care and, so far as I am aware, no one in Austria makes them at all, so I can hardly be said to be taking bread from the mouths of anybody.'

'But the money that is spent by poor, respectable Austrian parents on these corrupting German trinkets would otherwise be spent on healthy food grown by Austrian farmers. I see no reason why I, as the Emperor's accredited agent, should allow such a state of affairs. Do you?'

'Corrupting? Sir, they are the most innocent . . .'

'What are they called? Hm? Tell me that. What are they called?'

'Sir?'

'What is their *name*?'

'Diabolos, Sir. You must have seen them before . . .'

'Diabolos, precisely. *Diabolo* is the Italian for devil. Satan. The Corrupter. And you call them innocent!'

'But, *Herr Zollbeamter*, they are only called diabolo because they are . . . they are fiendishly difficult. To master. A challenge, a test of co-ordination and balance. Fun!'

'Fun, *Herr Tischlermeister*? You think it *fun* that the youth of Austria should waste time that would otherwise be profitably spent in study or manly exercise on some satanic German toy?'

'Sir, perhaps . . . perhaps you would like to try one

yourself? Here . . . a gift. I think you will find them harmless and amusing.'

'Oh dear,' Alois licked his lips. 'Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. A bribe. How unfortunate. A bribe. Dear me. Klingermann! Form KI 171, plenty of sealing wax and an Imperial Stamp!'

# MAKING FRIENDS

## *The History Muse*

Diabolical Thought Number One occurred to me on my way to Zuckermann's rooms.

I had passed through the Porter's Lodge and was walking around Old Court towards the archway that led to Hawthorn Tree. I might legitimately have been able to short cut *across*, not around the court, but I wasn't exactly sure that I was entitled to walk on the grass. The sign said 'Fellows Only' and I had never plucked up the nerve to ask if this included Junior Bye Fellows. I mean, it sounds so feeble to put the question. You know, as if you've just been made a prefect at school and you want to find out if that means you can wear trainers or call the teachers by their Christian names. Wet, or what?

Assert yourself, Michael, that's the thing. I mean, how much more has to happen to you before you'll believe that you've got as much right as anyone to inhabit the earth? A new attitude is needed: some dignity, some gravitas, something consonant with our new position in life . . .

These amiable thoughts were interrupted by a rumbling, a tumbling and a squawking as I passed the open stone doorway of F staircase in the corner of the courtyard. A figure rushed out in a squeaking blur and



stamped across the lawn. He was carrying a pile of CDs, a plaster bust, three velvet cushions and a rolled-up poster. I knew him for Edward Edwards, Double Eddie, someone with even less right than me to walk across the grass. He shared rooms and a life with another second year, James McDonell. They enjoyed embarrassing me by cat-calling me and shouting, 'get that *tush!*' or 'keryoot!' and other such shit when I walked past. A very sweet pair really, but prone to enacting hysterical scenes and bruiting abroad the supposedly superior virtues of their sexuality.

Double Eddie was shedding CDs at a great rate across the lawn.

'Woah!' I called after him. 'You've dropped these.'

Double Eddie didn't turn round or stop walking. His angry back turned to me, he just said, 'Don't care!' and sniffed.

Oh dear, I thought. Another row. I followed him, treading the grass gingerly, like a responsible father testing the ice to see if it will bear the weight of his children.

Behind us a voice shrieked out clear and high, echoing off the stonework and windows of the court. I looked round to see James framed in F staircase doorway, eyes flashing and arms akimbo.

*'Simply come back!'* he screamed.

Still Double Eddie strode on. 'Never!' he said, without a backward glance. 'Never, never, never, never, never.'

*'Oi!'*

Now Bill the Porter had emerged grimly from his lodge. 'Off the grass, gents, *if* you please.'

## Making History

Since Double Eddie had already reached the other side of the lawn and Bill had used an unambiguous plural, there now was the answer to my question about Junior Bye Fellows and lawns. *Verboten*.

As Double Eddie stalked through the lodge trying, without success, to whistle jauntily, I started to pick up the fallen CDs, blushing furiously under the porter's eye.

'Sorry!' I mumbled. 'I'll just get these and . . .'

Bill nodded grimly and watched my too much haste and not enough speed fumbblings. '*Festina lente. Eile mit Weile,*' I babbled to myself. When you're an academic and under pressure, you blather in Latin tags and foreign languages to remind yourself of your superiority. It never works.

I clumsily collected together Cabaret, Gypsy, Carousel, Sweeney Todd and the rest and tripped quickly back to James, who leaned against the doorway, his eyes wet with tears.

'Um, here you are then.'

His hand fended them away. '*I don't want the horrid things! You can burn them for all I care.*'

I put a hand to his heaving shoulder. 'I'll keep them for you then. Listen, I'm really sorry,' I said. 'I mean, it's a bummer. Being jilted.' He said nothing, so I continued, this time offering him all the benefit of my recent experience. 'I should know, man. I've been ditched too, you know?'

He stared at me as though I were mad. I thought perhaps he was going to tell me that in my case it wasn't the same thing at all. Instead he wailed that it simply

wasn't fair. Then he turned away and stomped up the stairs, leaving me with the CDs.

No, it isn't, I thought as I miserably trailed my laces through the archway and cut into the car-park, it simply isn't fair at all. To be left is indeed the bummiest bummer of all. How to separate the humiliation from the loss, that's the catch. You can never be sure if what tortures you is the pain of being without someone you love or the embarrassment of admitting that you have been rejected. I had already been playing with the idea of persuading Jane back so that *I* could be the one to do the jilting, just to even things up.

And in the car-park thar she blew: four thousand quidsworth of Renault Clio. *My Killer Loops* on the dash, I noticed. Bloody having *them*. I dropped the briefcase on the ground by the car, scabbled out my set of keys, opened the door and put them on. Does one assert one's self more or less when wearing dark glasses? You're hiding your eyes, which ought to count as timorous and weak, but then you're looking cool and way inscrutable. There again, you can't see so well in a car. I could make out a tube of mints in the floor-well, they were mine for sure. Remembered buying them at a service station. Come to think of it, half those tapes belonged to me too. I grabbed as many as I could hold. General mixture: bit of Pulp, Portishead, Kinks, Verdi, Tchaik, Blur, the Morricone and Alfred Newman collections and of course all my beloved Oily-Moily. She could keep the Mariah Carey, the k. d. lang, the Wagner and the Bach, I reckoned. Severed childless relationships in this age revolve

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around the custody of record collections, so it's essential to get your claim in first.

That was when Diabolical Thought Number One actually hit. I leaned further into the car and yanked the college parking permit from the inside of the windscreen and tore it up into tiny little shreds. Hee-hee.

Diabolical Thought Number Two struck as the tapes joined Double Eddie's opera CDs in my briefcase and I came upon that little bottle of Liquid Paper.

For a man of the keyboard generation I have to confess I do have top hand-writing. My godmother gave me an Osmiroid Calligraphy Set for Christmas when I was about fourteen and I really got into it for a while. You know, forming the letters properly, two strokes for an 'o', the dinky upward italic serifs on the descenders and ascenders, thick thin, thick thin, all nicely proportioned, the whole ball of wax. Should have seen my thank-you letters that year. Storming.

I leaned over the bonnet of the Renault like a suspect assuming the position for a US Highway Patrolman, poked my tongue out of one side of the mouth and got to work. It struck me as likely that the solvents in Liquid Paper would do something fabulously corrosive to the paintwork making my little message of love extremely difficult to remove without a whole boring, time-consuming and highly expensive respray. Cool. This, surely then, was the assertive Michael Young we had been looking for. My heart went thump-a-thump-a-thump as I stood back to get the full effect. Never really done anything like this before. Felt like shoplifting or buying pornography.

## Stephen Fry

The lettering was not as large as I would have liked, but a small bottle of Liquid Paper won't go far, even on the compact bonnet of a Clio. Nonetheless, the effect of white on Dubonnet Red was striking, and the wording, I reckoned, more or less on the money.

### I Have Been Stolen By A Mad Bitch

I stood admiring this for a little while, wondering whether or not I should also have a go at removing that *pathetic*, absolutely *pathetic*, sticker on the rear window, GENETICISTS DO IT IN VITRO hardi-fucking-har, when I realised it must be nearing eleven. I still had to deliver Zuckermann's bloody parcel, drop off the *Meisterwerk* in Fraser-Stuart's rooms and get to my own where a first year would be awaiting a supervision. If I remembered rightly she was late with a Castlereagh and Canning essay, on whose delivery I had sweetly granted two extensions already. She could expect the shortest of short short shrifts from me if she was late again. I, who had completed a two hundred thousand word thesis of closely reasoned, intensely researched, innovatively presented, elegantly phrased historical argument was not going to have any truck with lazy, shiftless undergraduates, however good my mood. No more Mr Nice Guy. Meet Dr Nasty.

I stooped to pick up the briefcase when IT happened. The most dreadful thing that could have happened did happen. A really shitty thing on its own, but which set in train what was possibly the shittiest event (or non-event) in the history of humanity. Of course, I couldn't

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have known that at the time. At the time, the personal disaster represented by this shitty happening was all that consumed me; believe me it was bad enough in its own right, without knowing that the destinies of millions hung on the event, without having even the vaguest idea that I was setting in train the explosion of everything I knew.

What happened was this. As I picked up my briefcase by its handle, the clasp, worn from years of handling and toting and tugging and hefting and lugging and kicking and dropping and schlepping, chose this moment to give way. Maybe it was the unaccustomed burden of Double Eddie's CDs, my music tapes, the *Meisterwerk* and that incorrectly pigeon-holed package from Seligmanns Verlag. Whatever. The brass three-tiered plaque that received the tongue of the clasp broke free from its rotten stapled moorings, pulling open the perished mouth of the briefcase and sending four hundred unbound pages of closely reasoned, intensely researched, innovatively presented, elegantly phrased historical argument into the eddying tornadoes of mid-May breeze that swirled around the car-park.

'Oh *no!*' I howled.

'Please no! No, no, no, no, no, no!' as I chased from corner to corner snatching at the flurry of flying pages like a kitten swatting snowflakes.

There's a TV programme where celebrities do this with money. A thousand currency notes are sent into the air by a wind machine and the sleb has to get hold of as many as possible. 'Grab A Grand' it's called. Presented

by that guy who looks like Kenneth Branagh in bearded Shakespearean mode. Edmunds, Noel Edmunds. Or possibly Edmonds.

Most of the table of contents had landed under the wheels of my/Jane's Renault in a safe bunch. The rest, the mighty body of the noble work, including appendices, tables, bibliography, index and acknowledgements, flew free.

Bending double to hold the rescued pages against my chest, I staggered from one whirl of paper to the next, clutching and clawing like a herring gull. Yes, all right, I can't have been like a kitten swatting snowflakes *and* a herring gull.

'God in helling pants, *no!* Come here, you bastards!' I screamed. '*Please!*'

But I was not alone.

'Dear, dear! This is unfortunate.' I turned to see an old man walking slowly through the car-park, calmly picking up page after page.

It seemed to me, in my fever and frenzy and grateful though I was for assistance, that it was all right for *him*, for everywhere he went the currents of air seemed to be stilled and the pages just fluttered lifelessly to the ground, content for him to pick them up. That couldn't be happening. But I stopped and stared and saw that it *was* happening. It really was. Really. Wherever he walked, the wind dropped before him. Like the wizard calming the brooms and dishes in the Sorcerer's Apprentice sequence in *Fantasia*. Which cast me, of course, as Mickey Mouse.

The old man turned to me. 'It is better if you approach

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from windward,' he said, germanically pronouncing the Ws as Vs, 'your body will shelter the papers.'

'Oh,' I said. 'Thanks. Yeah. Thank you.'

'And you should maybe do up your laces?'

There's always some wise-arse, isn't there? Someone who can make it look like you have absolutely no common sense. My father was like that until he learned better than to try to teach me the most rudimentary elements of carpentry or sailing. Then he died before I could repay him by showing any interest at all. This wise-arse was bearded, favouring the Tolstoy model over the Branagh-Shakespearean, and continued to step serenely through the car-park picking up the loose pages that lay down and played dead at his bidding.

The 'vindvood' technique kind of worked for me too and we both shuttled back and forth between the fallen pages and that landed fish of a dead, gasping briefcase.

Once all the visible paper had been gathered, I checked under each car and got myself as good and filthy and bleeding and torn on the outside as I was feeling on the in. The last page to be found was lying face down on the bonnet of the Clio, stuck to the drying Liquid Paper. I peeled it gently off.

This disaster only put me a day behind, of course. I mean, everything was there on hard disk back at our house in the village of Newnham but it wasn't, you know, it just wasn't a good omen. It meant buying another five hundred sheets of laserprinter paper and . . . well, somehow it scraped the guilt off the gingerbread, that's what I felt. The celebrations last night, the £62.00 Chateauf



du Pape, that feeling of freedom as I had bicycled into town . . . all premature.

A cloud went over the sun and I shivered. The Old Man was standing absolutely still and staring at one of the pages of the *Meisterwerk*.

'Thanks so much,' I panted pinkly. 'Stupidest thing. Must get a new briefcase.'

He looked up at me and something there was in that look, something that even then I could plainly recognise as monumental. A thing absolutely eternal and unutterable.

He returned the piece of paper he had been reading with a stiff bow. I saw that it was Page 49, from the first section of *Das Meisterwerk*, the part that covered the legitimisation of Alois right up to the marriage with Klara Pölzl.

'What is this, please?' he asked.

'It's, uh, my doctoral thesis,' I said.

'You are a graduate?'

I was accustomed to the surprise in his voice. I looked too young to be a graduate. Frankly, I looked too young to be an *undergraduate* sometimes. Maybe I would have to start trying to grow a beard again. If I had the testosterone that is. I had tried last year and the flak had nearly driven me to self-slaughter. I pinkened more and nodded.

'Why?' he asked, nodding down at the paper in his hand.

'I'm sorry?'

'Why that subject? Why?'

'*Why?*'

'Yes. *Why?*'