Stephen Fry

'A quite brilliant first novel'
Sunday Times



THE LIAR

THE BESTSELLING COMIC NOVEL

THE LIAR

Stephen Fry is an award-winning comedian, actor, presenter and director. He rose to fame alongside Hugh Laurie in *A Bit of Fry and Laurie* (which he co-wrote with Laurie) and *Jeeves and Wooster*, and was unforgettable as General Melchett in *Blackadder*. He has hosted over 180 episodes of QI, and has narrated all seven of the Harry Potter novels for the audiobook recordings.

He is the bestselling author of four novels – *The Stars' Tennis Balls*, *Making History*, *The Hippopotamus* and *The Liar* – as well as three volumes of autobiography – *Moab is My Washpot*, *The Fry Chronicles* and *More Fool Me*. *Mythos* and *Heroes*, his retelling of the Greek myths, are both *Sunday Times* bestsellers.

Praise for STEPHEN FRY and *THE LIAR*

'*The Liar* is hilarious – page after page of the most outrageous and often filthy jokes, delicious conceits, instant, brilliant ripostes that would only occur to ordinary mortals after days of teeth-grinding lunacy'

Literary Review

'A book which genuinely makes you laugh out loud is rarer than reviews and wrappers suggest. This one made me laugh three and a half times, which is one half more than *Lucky Jim*'

Sunday Telegraph

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‘Mr Fry revels in his own cleverness and writes with such panache that it’s difficult to avoid being swept up in the fun… He will make people very happy indeed, not just by virtue of zest and charm, but because he takes a crafstman’s pride in assembling the sentences’

The Times

‘The spirits of Oscar Wilde and Evelyn Waugh glower benignly over this funny first novel… An ingenious plot filled with surprises and glittering with hilarious, often indecent inventions’

New York Times

‘A huge critical and popular success in Britain . . . it is coruscatingly funny, often quite shocking and profoundly irreverent. Its hero is Adrian Healey, who assumes a wildly gay persona (and is one of the few Wilde imitators who can verbally live up to the original) but whose besetting problem is a lack of contact with reality . . . Many will find themselves helpless with laughter’

Publishers Weekly

‘Brilliantly entertaining and consistently outrageous, Fry’s brand of salacious humour (cross P.G Wodehouse with Simon Raven and you have some idea) spills out a tidal wave of manic delight’

Daily Mail

‘The Liar is a magnificent collision between Ronald Firbank and Chapman Pincher… genuinely funny, idiosyncratic invention with his signature on every page’

Evening Standard

‘In prose as elegant as an old-fashioned formal garden, he examines the nature of truth and the difference between genuine and specious intellect’

Cosmopolitan

‘Stephen Fry’s witty first novel strikes a chord with those who have been buggered at public school and gone on to do English at Oxbridge. It ought to be repulsive to anybody with an ounce of democracy in their souls, but it turns out to be hugely enjoyable’

Observer

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‘A book that is not only funny, clever and touching, but is the perfect size’

Rita Rudner

‘The sort of book we all hoped and, dangerously for the author, *expected* Stephen Fry to come up with… the wit sparkles, the comic set pieces work a treat, an enjoyably penetrating intelligence pervades throughout’

Sunday Times

‘Smutty, naughty and outrageously hilarious… Brace yourselves for a dickens of a wicked good time’

Boston Globe

‘*The Liar* is both extremely clever and extremely funny. Fry uses his undoubted skill as an entertainer to produce a serious, responsible and chilling book which has one laughing aloud throughout’

Financial Times

‘*The Liar* is very funny, full of intelligence and ideas, Post-Punk E. F. Benson’

Spectator

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Also available by Stephen Fry

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The Hippopotamus
Making History
The Stars' Tennis Balls
Mythos
Heroes
Troy

NON-FICTION

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To .....
(*insert full name here*)

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Not one word of the following is true

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A Fame *T-shirt stopped outside the house where Mozart was born. He looked up at the building and his eyes shone. He stood quite still, gazing upwards and glowing with adoration as a party of Bleached Denims and Fluorescent Bermuda Shorts pushed past him and went in. Then he shook his head, dug into his hip pocket and moved forwards. A thin high voice behind him caused him to stop mid-stride.*

'Have you ever contemplated, Adrian, the phenomenon of springs?'

'Coils, you mean?'

'Not coils, Adrian, no. Coils not. Think springs of water. Think wells and spas and sources. Well-springs in the widest and loveliest sense. Jerusalem, for instance, is a spring of religiosity. One small town in the desert, but the source of the world's three most powerful faiths. It is the capital of Judaism, the scene of Christ's crucifixion and the place from which Mohammed ascended into heaven. Religion seems to bubble from its sands.'

The Fame *T-shirt smiled to himself and walked into the building.*

A Tweed Jacket and a Blue Button-down Shirt of Oxford Cotton stopped in front of the steps. Now it was their turn

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to stare reverently upwards as the tide of human traffic streamed past them along the Getreidegasse.

'Take Salzburg. By no means the chief city of Austria, but a Jerusalem to any music lover. Haydn, Schubert and . . . oh dear me yes, here we are . . . and Mozart.'

'There's a theory that special lines criss-cross the earth and that where they coincide strange things happen,' said the Oxford Cotton Button-down Shirt. 'Ley-lines, I think they call them.'

'You'll think I'm grinding my axe,' said the Jacket, 'but I should say that it is the German language that is responsible.'

'Shall we go up?'

'By all means.' The pair moved into the interior shadows of the house.

'You see,' continued the Tweed, 'all the qualities of ironic abstraction that the language could not articulate found expression in their music.'

'I had never thought of Haydn as ironic.'

'It is of course quite possible that my theory is hopelessly wrong. Pay the nice Fräulein, Adrian.'

*

In a second-storey chamber where little Wolfgang had romped, whose walls he had covered with precocious arithmetic and whose rafters he had made tremble with infant minuets, the Fame *T-shirt examined the display cases.*

The ivory and tortoise-shell combs that once had smoothed

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the ruffled ringlets of the young genius appeared not to interest the T-shirt at all, nor the letters and laundry-lists, nor the child-size violins and violas. His attention was entirely taken up by the models of stage designs which were set into the wall in glass boxes all round the room.

One box in particular seemed to fascinate him. He stared at it with intensity and suspicion as if half expecting the little papier mâché figures inside to burst through the glass and punch him on the nose. He appeared to be oblivious of the group of Bleached Denims and Acid-coloured Shorts that pressed around him, laughing and joking in a language he didn't understand.

The model that so particularly engrossed him was of a banqueting hall in which stood a dining table heaped high with food. Two little men had been placed by the table, one crouched in terror, the other standing with hand on hip, in an attitude of cavalier contempt. Both figures looked upstage at the model of a white statue which pointed down at them with the accusing finger of an Italian traffic policeman or wartime recruiting poster.

The Tweed Jacket and the Blue Button-down had just entered the room.

'You start at that end, Adrian, and we'll meet in the middle.'

The Jacket watched the Oxford Cotton move to the other end of the room and then approached the cabinet, whose glass was still being misted by the intense scrutiny of the Fame *T-shirt.*

'Don Giovanni,' *said the Tweed coming up behind him,*

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'a cenar teco m'invitasti, e son venuto. *Don Giovanni, you invited me to dinner, and here I am.'*

The T-shirt still stared into the glass. 'Non si pasce di cibo mortale, Chi si pasce di cibo celeste,' *he whispered. 'He who dines on heavenly food has no need of mortal sustenance.'*

'I believe you have something for me,' said the Tweed.

'Goldener Hirsch, name of Emburey. Small package.'

'Emburey? Middlesex and England? I had no idea you were interested in cricket.'

'I get it out from a newspaper. It looked a very English name.'

'And so it is. Goodbye.'

The Tweed moved on and joined the Blue Shirt, who had fallen into conversation with a Frenchwoman.

'I was telling this lady,' said the Shirt, 'that I thought the design for The Magic Flute *over there was by David Hockney.'*

'Certainly so,' said the Tweed. 'Hockney seems to me to paint in two styles. Wild and natural or cold and clinical. I seem to remember remarking that there are two kinds of Hockney. Field Hockney and Ice Hockney.'

'Please?'

'It's a joke,' explained the Blue Shirt.

'Ah.'

The Tweed was examining an exhibit.

'This figure here must be the Queen of the Night, surely.'

'She is a character altogether of the most extraordinary, I believe,' said the Frenchwoman. 'Her music – my God,

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how but that it is divine. I am myself singer and to play the Queen is the dearest dream of my bosom.'

'It's certainly one hell of a part,' said the Oxford Cotton. *'Pretty difficult I'd have thought. What's that incredibly high note she has to reach? It's a top C, isn't it?'*

The Frenchwoman's answer to this question startled not just the Blue Button-down Shirt and his companion, but the whole room. For she stared at the Blue Shirt, her eyes round with fright, opened her mouth wide and let go a piercing soprano note of a purity and passion that she was never to repeat in the whole of her subsequent, and distinguished, operatic career.

'Good lord,' said the Tweed, 'is it really that high? As I remember it –'

'Donald!' said the Button-down Shirt. 'Look!'

The Tweed Jacket turned and saw the cause of the scream and the cause of other, less technically proficient, screams that were starting up everywhere.

In the middle of the room stood a man in a Fame *T-shirt, twitching and leaping like a puppet.*

It was not the crudity of such a dance in such a place that had set everyone off, it was the sight and sound of the blood that creamed and frothed from his throat. The man seemed, as be hopped and stamped about, to be trying to stem the flow by squeezing at his neck with both bands, but the very pressure of the blood as it pumped outwards made such a task impossible.

Time stands still at such moments.

Those who retold the scene afterwards to friends, to psychiatrists, to priests, to the press, all spoke of the noise. *To*

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some it was a rattling gargle, to others a bubbling croak: the old man in the tweed jacket and his young companion agreed that they could never hear again the sound of a cappuccino machine without being forced to think of that awful death wheeze.

All remembered the staggering quantity of the blood, the force of it pushing through the man's fingers. All remembered the chorus of bass voices upraised in panic as helping hands braved the red shower and leapt forward to ease the jerking figure to the floor. All recalled how nothing could staunch the ferocious jetting of the fountain that gushed from the man's neck and quenched the words 'I'm Going to Live For Ever' on his T-shirt with a dark stain. All remarked on how long it seemed to take him to die.

But only one of them remembered seeing an enormously fat man with a small head and lank hair leave the room, letting a knife leap from his hand like a live fish as he went.

Only one man saw that, and he kept it to himself. He grabbed his companion's hand and led him from the room.

'Come, Adrian. I think we should be otherwhere.'

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I

Adrian checked the orchid at his buttonhole, inspected the spats at his feet, gave the lavender gloves a twitch, smoothed down his waistcoat, tucked the ebony Malacca-cane under his arm, swallowed twice and pushed wide the changing-room door.

'Ah, my dears,' he cried. 'Congratulations! Congratulations to you all! A triumph, an absolute triumph!'

'Well, what the fuck's he wearing now?' they snorted from the steamy end of the room.

'You're an arse and an idiot, Healey.'

Burkiss threw a flannel onto the shiny top hat. Adrian reached up and took it between forefinger and thumb.

'If there is the slightest possibility, Burkiss, that this flannel has absorbed any of the juices that leak from within you, that it has mopped up a single droplet of your revolting pubescent greases, that it has tickled and frotted even one of the hideously mired corners of your disgusting body then I shall have a spasm. I'm sorry but I shall.'

In spite of himself, Cartwright smiled. He moved further along the bench and turned his back, but he smiled.

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'Now, girls,' continued Healey, 'you're very high-spirited and that's as it should be but I won't have you getting out of hand. I just looked in to applaud a simply marvellous show and to tell you that you are certainly the loveliest chorus in town and that I intend to stand you all dinner at the Embassy one by one over the course of what I know will be a long and successful run.'

'I mean, what kind of coat is that?'

'It is called an astrakhan and I am sure you agree that it is absolutely the ratherest thing. You will observe it fits my sumptuous frame as snugly as if it were made for me . . . just as you do, you delicious Hopkinson.'

'Oh shut up.'

'Your whole body goes quite pink when you are flattered, like a small pig, it is utterly, utterly fetching.'

Adrian saw Cartwright turn away and face his locker, a locker to which Adrian had the key. The boy seemed now to be concentrating on pulling on his socks. Adrian took half a second to take a mental snapshot of the scrummy toes and heavenly ankle being sheathed by those lucky, lucky socks, a snapshot he could develop and pore over later with all the others that he had pasted into the private album of his memory.

Cartwright wondered why Healey sometimes stared at him like that. He could sense it when he did, even when he couldn't see, he could feel those cool eyes surveying him with pity and contempt for a younger boy who didn't have so sharp a tongue, so acid a wit

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as almighty Healey. But there were others dumber than he was, why should Healey single him out for special treatment?

Setting a spatted foot on the bench that ran down the middle of the changing-room with elegant disdain, Adrian began to flip through a pile of Y-fronts and rugger shorts with his cane.

'I was particularly taken,' he said, 'with that number in the first act when you and the girls from Marlborough stood in a line and jumped up at that funny leather ball. It was too utterly utter for words. Lord how I laughed when you let the Marlborough chorus run off with it . . . dear me, this belongs to someone who doesn't appear to know how to wipe his bottom. Is there a name-tape? Madison, you really should pay more attention to your personal hygiene, you know. Two sheets of lavatory paper is all it takes. One to wipe and one to polish. Oh, how you skipped after that Marlborough pack, you blissful creatures! But they wouldn't give you the ball, would they? They kept banging it on the ground and kicking it over your lovely goalpost.'

'It was the referee,' said Gooderson. 'He had it in for us.'

'Well whatever, Gooderson darling, the fact is that after this wonderful matinée performance there is no doubt that you are all going to become simply the toast of the town. Certain unscrupulous men may call upon you here in your dressing-room. They will lavish you with flowers, with compliments, with phials of Hungary

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water and methuselahs of the costliest champagne. You must be wary of such men, my hearts, they are not to be trusted.'

'What, what will they do to us?'

'They will take the tender flower of your innocence, Jarvis, and they will bruise it.'

'Will it hurt?'

'Not if it is prepared beforehand. If you come to my study this evening I will ready you for the process with a soothing unguent of my own invention. Wear something green, you should always wear green, Jarvis.'

'Ooh, can I come too?' said Rundell, who was by way of being the Tart of the House.

'And me!' squeaked Harman.

'All are welcome.'

The voice of Robert Bennett-Jones bellowed from the showers. 'Just shut up and get bloody dressed.'

'You're invited too, R.B.-J., didn't I make that clear?'

Bennett-Jones, hairy and squat, came out of the shower and stumped up to Adrian.

Cartwright dropped his rugger shirt into the laundry bin and left the changing-room, trailing his dufflebag along the ground. As the doors flapped behind him he heard Bennett-Jones's harsh baritone.

'You are disgusting, Healey, you know that?'

He should stay to hear Healey's magnificent putdown, but what was the point? They said that when Healey arrived he had got the highest ever marks in a scholarship entrance. Once, in his first term, Cartwright had

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been bold enough to ask him why he was so clever, what exercises he did to keep his brain fit. Healey had laughed.

'It's memory, Cartwright, old dear. Memory, the mother of the Muses . . . at least that's what thingummy said.'

'Who?'

'You know, what's his name, Greek poet chap. Wrote the Theogony . . . what *was* he called? Begins with an "H".'

'Homer?'

'No, dear. Not Homer, the other one. No, it's gone. Anyway. Memory, that's the key.'

Cartwright went into the House library and took down the first volume of the Chambers Encyclopaedia. He had still only got as far as Bismarck.

In the changing-room, Bennett-Jones snarled into Adrian's face.

'Just plain fucking disgusting.'

The others, some of whom had been peacocking about the room, stroking their towels round their napes like boas, staggered to guilty halts.

'You're a fucking queer and you're turning the whole House into fucking queers.'

'Queer am I?' said Adrian. 'They called Oscar Wilde a queer, they called Michelangelo a queer, they called Tchaikovsky a –'

'And they were queers,' said Sargent, another prefect.

'Well, yes, there is that,' conceded Adrian, 'my argument rather falls down there I grant you, but what I say

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is this, my door is always open to you, R.B.-J., and to you as well, Sargent, naturally, and if either of you has any problems in coming to terms with your sexuality you mustn't hesitate to visit me and talk about it.'

'Oh for God's sake –'

'We can thrash it out together. Personally I think it's your habit of dressing up in shorts and prancing about on a field and this bizarre obsession with putting your arms round the other members of the scrum and forcing your head between the bottoms of the back row that is at the root of this insane fixation. The lady doth protest too much, methinks.'

'Let's fucking throw him out,' said Sargent, advancing.

'Now I warn you,' said Adrian, 'if either of you touches me . . .'

'Yes?' sneered Bennett-Jones. 'What'll you do?'

'I shall sustain a massive erection, that's what, and I shan't be answerable for the consequences. Some kind of ejaculation is almost bound to ensue and if either of you were to become pregnant I should never forgive myself.'

This was just enough to bring the others down onto his side and have the prefects laughed into retreat.

'Well, my lovelies, I shall have to leave you now. I am promised to the Princess Despina this evening. A little baccarat after supper is my guess. She means to win back the Kurzenauer Emeralds. Jarvis, you have a stiffy, this is most unpleasant, someone throw some cold water over him. Goonight, Lou. Goonight, May. Goonight. Ta ta.

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Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night.'

*

English boarding schools have much to recommend them. If boys are going to be adolescent, and science has failed to come up with a way of stopping them, then much better to herd them together and let them get on with it in private. Six hundred suits of skin oozing with pustules, six hundred scalps weeping oil, twelve hundred armpits shooting out hair, twelve hundred inner thighs exploding with fungus and six hundred minds filling themselves with suicidal drivel: the world is best protected from this.

For the good of society, therefore, Adrian Healey, like many Healeys before him, had been sent to a prep school at the age of seven, had proceeded to his public school at twelve and now, fifteen years old, he stood trembling with pubertal confusion on the brink of life. There was little to admire. The ravages of puberty had attacked his mind more than his skin, which was some kind of a blessing. From time to time a large, yellow-crowned spot would pop from his forehead, or a blackhead worm its way from the sweaty shelter of the side of his nose, but generally the complexion was good enough not to betray the hormonal crisis and mental havoc that boiled within and the eyes were wide and sensual enough for him to be thought attractive. Too smart at exam passing to be kept out of the Sixth Form, too disrespectful and dishonourable

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to be a prefect, he had read and absorbed more than he could understand, so he lived by pastiche and pretence.

His constipation, furred tongue and foul-smelling feet were no more than conventional school attributes, passed down from generation to generation, like slang and sadism. Adrian might have been unorthodox, but he was not so blind to the proper decencies as to cultivate smooth-flowing bowels or healthy feet. His good nature prevented him from discovering the pleasures of bullying and his cowardice allowed him to ignore it in others.

The great advantage of English public school life lies of course in the quality of tutelage it provides. Adrian had received a decent and broad English education in the area of his loins. Not all the credit for this could go to his schoolmasters, although a few of them had not been afraid to give practical guidance and instruction of a kind which would gladden the heart of those who believe that the modern teacher is slipshod in his approach to the Whole Boy. Mostly he had been given space to make his own way and learn his own lessons of the flesh. He had quickly happened upon the truth which many lonely contemporaries would never discover, the truth that everybody, simply everybody, was panting for it and could, with patience, be *shown* that they were panting for it. So Adrian grabbed what was to hand and had the time of his life genitally – focusing exclusively on his own gender of course, for this was 1973 and girls had not yet been invented.

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His love life, however, was less happy. Earlier that afternoon he had worshipped at his altar in a private welter of misery that his public swagger never hinted at.

It had been upstairs, in the Long Dorm. The room was empty, the floorboards squeaking more faintly than usual beneath his tread. Cartwright's cubicle had its curtain drawn. The distant moan of whistles and cheers on the Upper Games Field and the nearer bang of a downstairs door slamming shut had unsettled him. They were over-familiar, with a bogus, echoing quality, a staginess that put him on his guard. The whole school knew he was here. They knew he liked to creep about the House alone. They were watching, he was convinced of it. The background shouts of rugger and hockey weren't real, they were part of a taped soundtrack played to deceive him. He was walking into a trap. It had always been a trap. No one had ever believed in him. They signed him off games and let him think that he had the House to himself. But they knew, they had always known. Tom, Bullock, Heydon-Bayley, even Cartwright. Especially Cartwright. They watched and they waited. They all knew and they all bided their time until the moment they had chosen for his exposure and disgrace.

Let them watch, let them know. Here was Cartwright's bed and under the pillow, here, yes, here the pyjamas. Soft brushed cotton, like Cartwright's soft brushed hair and a smell, a smell that was Cartwright to the last molecule. There was even a single gold hair shining on the collar, and there, just down there, a new aroma, an aroma,

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an essence that rippled outwards from the centre of the whole Cartwrightness of Cartwright.

For Adrian other people did not exist except as extras, as bit-players in the film of his life. No one but he had noted the splendour and agony of existence, no one else was truly or fully alive. He alone gasped at dew trapped in cobwebs, at spring buds squeaking into life. Afternoon light bouncing like a yo-yo in a stream of spittle dropping from a cow's lips, the slum-wallpaper peel of bark on birches, the mash of wet leaves pulped into pavements, they grew and burst only in him. Only he knew what it was to love.

Haaaaaaah . . . if they really were watching then now was the time to pull back the curtain and jeer, now was the time to howl contempt.

But nothing. No yells, no sneers, no sound at all to burst the swollen calm of the afternoon.

Adrian trembled as he stood and did himself up. It was an illusion. Of course it was an illusion. No one watched, no one judged, no one pointed or whispered. Who were they, after all? Low-browed, scarlet-naped rugger-buggers with no more grace and vision than a jockstrap.

Sighing, he had moved to his own cubicle and laid out the astrakhan coat and top hat.

If you can't join them, he thought, beat them.

*

He had fallen in love with Hugo Alexander Timothy Cartwright the moment he laid eyes on him, when, as

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one of a string of five new arrivals, the boy had trickled into evening hall the first night of Adrian's second year.

Heydon-Bayley nudged him.

'What do you reckon, Healey? Lush, or what?'

For once Adrian had remained silent. Something was terribly wrong.

It had taken him two painful terms to identify the symptoms. He looked them up in all the major textbooks. There was no doubt about it. All the authorities concurred: Shakespeare, Tennyson, Ovid, Keats, Georgette Heyer, Milton, they were of one opinion. It was love. The Big One.

Cartwright of the sapphire eyes and golden hair, Cartwright of the Limbs and Lips: he was Petrach's Laura, Milton's Lycidas, Catullus's Lesbia, Tennyson's Hallam, Shakespeare's fair boy and dark lady, the moon's Endymion. Cartwright was Garbo's salary, the National Gallery, he was cellophane: he was the tender trap, the blank unholy surprise of it all and the bright golden haze on the meadow: he was honey-honey, sugar-sugar, chirpy chirpy cheep-cheep and his baby-love: the voice of the turtle could be heard in the land, there were angels dining at the Ritz and a nightingale sang in Berkeley Square.

Adrian had managed to coax Cartwright into an amusing half-hour in the House lavs two terms previously, but he had never doubted he could get the trousers down: that wasn't it. He wanted something more from him than the few spasms of pleasure that the limited

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activities of rubbing and licking and heaving and pushing could offer.

He wasn't sure what the thing was that he yearned for, but one thing he did know. It was less acceptable to love, to ache for eternal companionship, than it was to bounce and slurp and gasp behind the fives courts. Love was Adrian's guilty secret, sex his public pride.

*

He closed the changing-room door and fanned himself with the lavender gloves. It had been a close thing. Too close. The greater the lengths he went to to be liked, the more enemies he gathered on the way. If he fell, Bennett-Jones and others would be there to kick him. One thing was for certain, the Queer Pose was running dry and a new one was going to have to be dreamt up or there would be Trouble.

A gang of fags was mobbing about by the noticeboards. They fell silent as he approached. He patted one of them on the head.

'Pretty children,' he sighed, digging into his waistcoat pocket and pulling out a handful of change. 'Tonight you shall eat.'

Scattering the coins at their feet, he moved on.

Mad, he said to himself as he approached his study door. I think I must be mad.

Tom was there, in a yoga position, biting his toenails and listening to *Aqualung*. Adrian sank into a chair and removed his hat.

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'Tom,' he said, 'you are looking at a crushed violet, a spent egg, a squeezed tube.'

'I'm looking at a git,' said Tom. 'What's with the coat?'

'You're right,' said Adrian, 'I *am* stupid today. And every day. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Horrid, horrid, horrid. Morbid, morbid, morbid. Torrid, torpid, turbid. Everything in my life ends in id. Get it?'

'Get what?'

'Id. It's Freud. You know.'

'Oh. Right. Yeah. Id.'

'Idealistic idiot, idiosyncratic idler. Everything *begins* in id as well.'

'Everything begins with "I", you mean. Which is ego,' said Tom, placing an ankle behind his ear, 'not id.'

'Well of course it's very easy to be clever. If you could just help me out of this coat, I'm beginning to sweat.'

'Sorry,' said Tom. 'I'm stuck.'

'Are you serious?'

'No.'

Adrian fought his way out of his costume and into his uniform while Tom reverted to a half-lotus and recounted his day.

'Went into town and bought a couple of LPs this afternoon.'

'Don't tell me,' said Adrian, 'let me guess . . . *Parsifal* and *Lark Ascending*?'

'Atom Heart Mother and *Salty Dog.'*

'Close.'

Tom lit a cigarette.

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'You know what pisses me off about this place?'

'The cuisine? The distressingly plain uniforms?'

'I bumped into Rosengard in the High Street and he asked me why I wasn't watching the match. I mean what?'

'You should've asked him why *he* wasn't.'

'I said I was just on my way.'

'Rebel.'

'I like to keep my nose clean.'

'Well, "I'm just on my way" isn't a very stylish handkerchief, is it? You could have said that the match was too exciting and that your nervous system simply couldn't bear any more suspense.'

'Well I didn't. I came back here, had a wank and finished that book.'

'The Naked Lunch?'

'Yeah.'

'What did you reckon?'

'Crap.'

'You're just saying that because you didn't understand it,' said Adrian.

'I'm just saying that because I did understand it,' said Tom. 'Any road up, we'd better start making some toast. I invited Bullock and Sampson over.'

'Oh, *what*?'

'We owe them a study tea.'

'You know I hate intellectuals.'

'You mean you hate people who are cleverer than you are.'

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'Yes. I suppose that's why I like you so much, Tom.'
Tom gave him a pained, constipated stare.
'I'll boil the kettle,' he said.

*

Cartwright looked up from the Chambers Encyclopaedia and mouthed, 'Otto Von Bismarck born in . . . in 1815, the year of Waterloo and the Congress of Vienna. Founder of modern Germany . . .'

In his line of sight were hundreds of books, the only one of which he could remember reading was *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the company of the rest of his fifth form at prep school. Such a great many books and yet this was still only the House library. The School library had thousands and thousands more and university libraries . . . Time was so short and his memory so feeble. What was it Healey had said? Memory is the mother of the Muses.

Cartwright levered Malthus to Nantucket from off the shelf and looked up Muses. There were nine of them and they were the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne. If Healey was right then Mnemosyne must mean memory.

Of course! The English word 'mnemonic', something that reminds you of something. Mnemonic must be derived from Mnemosyne. Or the other way around. Cartwright made a note in his rough-book.

According to the encyclopaedia, most of what was known of the Muses came down from the writings of Hesiod, particularly this Theogony. That must have been the poet Healey was referring to, Hesiod. But how did

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Healey *know* all that? He never seemed to be reading, at least no more than anyone else. Cartwright would never catch up with him. It just wasn't bloody fair.

He wrote down the names of the Muses and returned with a sigh to Bismarck. One day he would get right to the end, to zythum. Not that he needed to. He had peeped ahead and seen that it was a kind of ancient Egyptian beer, much recommended by Diodorus Siculus – whoever he was.

*

Everyone had been rather surprised the day Adrian announced that he was going to share a study with Tom.

'Thompson?' Heydon-Bayley had shrieked. 'But he's a complete dildo, surely?'

'I like him,' said Adrian, 'he's unusual.'

'Graceless, you mean. Wooden.'

Certainly there was nothing obviously appetising about Tom's appearance or manner, and he remained one of the few boys of his year with whom Adrian had never made the beast with two backs, or rather with whom he had never made the beast with one back and an interestingly shaped middle, but over the last year, more people had come to see that there was something arresting about Tom. He wasn't clever, but he worked hard and had set himself to read a great deal, in order, Adrian assumed, to acquire some of Adrian's dash and sparkle. Tom always went his own way with his own ideas. He managed to get away with the longest hair in the House

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and the most public nicotine habit in the school, somehow without ever drawing attention to himself. It was as if he grew his hair long and smoked cigarettes because he liked to, not because he liked being seen to. This was dangerously subversive.

Freda, the German undermatron, once discovered him sunbathing nude in the spinney.

'Thompson,' she had cried in outrage, 'you cannot be lying about naked!'

'Sorry, Matron, you're right,' Tom murmured, and he had reached out a hand and put on a pair of mirrored sunglasses. 'Don't know what I was thinking of.'

Adrian felt that it was he who had brought Tom into notice and popularity, that Tom was his own special creation. The silent spotty gink of the first year had been transformed into someone admired and imitated and Adrian wasn't sure how much he liked it.

He liked Tom all right. He was the only person he had ever spoken to about his love for Cartwright and Tom had the decency not to be interested or sympathetic enough to quench the pure holy flame of Adrian's passion with sympathy or advice. Sampson and Bullock he could do without, however. Especially Sampson, who was too much of a grammar-school-type swot ever to be quite the thing. Not an ideal tea-companion at all.

Tea was a very special institution, revolving as it did around the ceremony and worship of Toast. In a place where alcohol, tobacco and drugs were forbidden, it was essential that something should take their place as a

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powerful and public totem of virility and cool. Toast, for reasons lost in time, was the substance chosen. Its name was dropped on every possible occasion, usually pronounced, in awful public school accents, 'taste'.

'I was just having some toast, when Burton and Hopwood came round . . .'

'Harman's not a bad fag actually. He makes really majorly good toast . . .'

'Yeah, you should come round to my study, maybe, we'll get some toast going . . .'

'God, I can hardly move. I've just completely overdone it on the toast . . .'

Adrian had been looking forward to toasting up with Tom in private and talking about Cartwright.

'Oh, Christ,' he said, clearing a space on his desk for the teapot. 'Oh, Christly Christ.'

'Problem?'

'I shall know no peace other than being kissed by him,' moaned Adrian.

'That a fact?'

'It is a fact, and I'll tell you what else is a fact. It's a fact that he is wearing his blue Shetland turtle-neck today. Even as we speak his body is moving inside it. Warm and quick. It's more than flesh and blood can stand.'

'Have a cold shower, then,' said Tom.

Adrian banged down the teapot and grabbed Tom by the shoulder.

'Cold shower?' he shouted. 'Jessica Christ, man, I'm talking about love! You know what it does to me? It

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shrinks my stomach, doesn't it, Tom? It pickles my guts, yeah. But what does it do to my mind? It tosses the sandbags overboard so the balloon can soar. Suddenly I'm above the ordinary. I'm competent, supremely competent. I'm walking a tightrope over Niagara Falls. I'm one of the great ones. I'm Michelangelo, moulding the beard of Moses. I'm Van Gogh, painting pure sunlight. I'm Horowitz, playing the Emperor Concerto. I'm John Barrymore before the movies got him by the throat. I'm Jesse James and his two brothers – all three of them. I'm W. Shakespeare. And out there it's not the school any longer – it's the Nile, Tom, the Nile – and down it floats the barge of Cleopatra.'

'Not bad,' said Tom, 'not bad at all. Your own?'

'Ray Milland in *The Lost Weekend*. But he could have been talking about Cartwright.'

'But he was talking about alcohol,' said Tom, 'which should tell you a lot.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning shut up and get buttering.'

'I shall put the *Liebestod* on the stereo, that's what I shall do, you horrid beastly man,' said Adrian, 'and still my beating heart with concord of sweet sounds. But quick, man! – I hear a hansom drawing up outside! And here, Watson, unless I am very much mistaken, is our client now upon the stair. Come in!'

Sampson appeared at the doorway, blinking through his spectacles, followed by Bullock who tossed a jar at Tom.

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'Hi. I brought some lemon curd.'

'Lemon curd!' said Adrian. 'And what was I saying only this minute, Tom?' "If only we had some lemon curd for our guests." You're a mind-reader, Bollocks.'

'Some toast over there,' said Tom.

'Thanks, Thompson,' said Sampson, helping himself. 'Gooderson tells me you were not unadjacent to mobbing up R.B.-J. and Sargent in the changing-rooms, Healey.'

'Dame Rumour outstrides me yet again.'

Not unadjacent? Jesus . . .

Bullock slapped Tom on the back.

'Hey, Tommo!' he said. 'I see you've got *Atom Heart Mother* at last. What do you reckon? Far outsville or far insville?'

While Tom and Bullock talked about Pink Floyd, Sampson told Adrian why he thought Mahler was in actual fact wilder, in the sense of more controlled, than any rock group.

'That's an interesting point,' said Adrian, 'in the sense of not being interesting at all.'

When the tea and toast were finished, Bullock stood up and cleared his throat.

'I think I should announce my plan now, Sam.'

'Definitely,' said Sampson.

'What ho!' said Adrian, getting up to shut the door. 'Treasons, stratagems and spoils.'

'It's like this,' said Bullock. 'My brother, I don't know if you know, is at Radley, on account of my parents thinking it a bad idea to have us both at the same school.'

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'On account of your being twins?' said Adrian.

'Right, on account of my mother OD-ing on fertility drugs. Any old way, he wrote to me last week telling me about an incredible bitch of a row blazing there on account of someone having been and gone and produced an unofficial magazine called *Raddled*, full of obscene libellous *Oz*-like filth. And what I thought, what Sammy and I thought, was – why not?'

'Why not what?' said Tom.

'Why not do the same thing here?'

'You mean an underground magazine?'

'Yup.'

Tom opened and shut his mouth. Sampson smirked.

'Jesus suffering fuck,' said Adrian. 'It's not half a thought.'

'Face it, it's a wow.'

'These guys,' said Tom, 'the ones who put out this magazine at Radley. What happened to them?'

Sampson polished his spectacles with the end of his tie.

'Ah, now this is why we must proceed with great circumspection. They were both, hum, "put out" themselves. "Booted out" I believe is the technical phrase.'

'That means it's got to be a secret,' said Bullock. 'We write it in the holidays. You send me the material, typed onto stencils. I get it duplicated on my dad's office Gestetner, bring it back at the beginning of next term, we find a way of distributing it secretly round all the Houses.'

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'All a bit Colditz, isn't it?' said Tom.

'No, no!' said Adrian. 'Don't you listen to Thompson, he's an old cynicky-boots. I'm in, Bollocks. I'm in for definite. What sort of material do you want?'

'Oh you know,' said Bullock, 'seditious, anti-public school. That kind of thing. Something to shake them up a bit.'

'I'm planning a sort of *fabliau* comparing this place with a fascist state,' said Sampson, 'sort of *Animal Farm* meets *Arturo Ui* . . .'

'Stop it, Sammy, I'm wet at the very thought,' said Adrian.

He looked across at Tom.

'What do you reckon?'

'Yeah, why not? Sounds a laugh.'

'And remember,' said Bullock, 'not a word to *anyone*.'

'Our lips are sealed,' said Adrian. *Lips. Sealed*. Dangerous words. Not five minutes could pass without him thinking of Cartwright.

Bullock took a tobacco tin out of his pocket and looked around the room.

'Now,' he said, 'if someone would close the curtains and light a joss-stick, I have here for your delight some twenty-four-carat black Nepalese cannabis resin which should be smoked immediately on account of it being seriously good shit.'

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II

Adrian threw himself along the corridor towards Biffen's form-room. Dr Meddlar, one of the school chaplains, stopped him.

'Late, Healey.'

'Really, sir? So am I.'

Meddlar took him by the shoulders. 'You're riding for a fall, Healey, you know that? There are hedges and ditches ahead and you are on course for an almighty cropper.'

'Sir.'

'And I shall be cheering and laughing as you tumble,' said Meddlar, his spectacles flashing.

'That's just the warm-hearted Christian in you, sir.'

'Listen to me!' spat Meddlar. 'You think you're very clever, don't you? Well let me tell you that this school has no room for creatures like you.'

'Why are you saying this to me, sir?'

'Because if you don't learn to live with others, if you don't conform, your life is going to be one long miserable hell.'

'Will that give you satisfaction, sir? Will that please you?'

Meddlar stared at him and gave a hollow little laugh. 'What gives you the right to talk to me like that, boy? What on earth do you think gives you the right?'

Adrian was furious to find that there were tears

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