

The Well- Tempered Clavier

William Coles

Based on a true story

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To Margot, my wife

Acknowledgements

I hesitate from turning this into a teary-eyed Oscar speech, but there are a number of people I need to thank.

Ever since I embarked on this novel-writing venture – some years ago, I can tell you – I have had a coterie of stalwart cheerleaders. These are the ones I would especially like to thank:

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To my parents, Bob and Sarah (who will doubtless cringe when they read this, so I'll keep it short), I say a special thanks – not least for their perpetual bullishness.

My two boys, Dexter and Geordie, will one day, I hope, realise how they have been an unending source of good cheer to me.

And lastly, *merci mille fois* to Margot – a great wife and, as it happens, a great friend also.

BOOK 1, PRELUDE 17, A-flat Major

I am not given to emotion.

But even now, 25 years on, the sound of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* makes the hairs bristle at the nape of my neck. My stomach spasms, my heart jolts, and in an instant I am back there, back in a small music room with lime-green walls and a scuffed upright Steinway.

The Well-Tempered Clavier comprises 96 preludes and fugues that Johann Sebastian Bach wrote for the Clavier, or piano as it is now called.

I know each one. And once, when I was in my musical prime, I could play a number of them too.

There is one prelude, however, that I only play on the glory days, on the anniversaries. And that is when I start to choke up.

I used to be able to play this prelude from memory, note perfect, every finger knowing exactly where and when they had to be on the keyboard. But those were in the palmy days when I was prepared to devote two hours to practising a single bar of music.

Today all I have left are the relics of my indifferent musical talent. I can only manage five bars before my fingers clunk onto the wrong notes. Everything ends in discord.

Though if I were note perfect, it would make no difference. For even years back I could never finish the prelude without crying.

It's the Prelude 17, in A-flat Major.

When I write it like that, it sounds so stark.

But you should hear it. Hear all 90 seconds of it. Even first time round, right off the gun, you'd think it quite charming. Delightful.

Second time it's even better.

The purists might claim Bach wrote many better preludes. But then memory is everything, is it not? And when I hear this prelude, I dream of a woman who was, is, and will always remain, the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.

When I think of her, she is never static, like in a photo. For as I remember her she is always laughing, really laughing, mouth open, with the most perfect white teeth.

First I recall her mouth and then her hair, a dark mane that cascaded over her shoulders in a glistening wave of silk; and her lips, always kissable red, erotic moist; and her flashing walnut eyes; and her fingers, long sensual fingers with exquisite buffed nails, tailor-made for the piano.

I've had other loves since – extraordinary passions. Though their stories are for another time.

This woman was my first great love.

And her name? Her name was India.

I know that what she did was wrong, that it is immoral for a teacher to seduce her 17-year-old pupil. But at the time that was not how I saw it. I thought I'd been given the greatest gift of my life.

My memories though run in sequence. And always, after remembering the magic of India, I recall myself 25 years ago.

These days everything has mellowed into easy come, easy go.

But then I was all things and everything: exuberant and truculent, moody and energetic, sporty and slothful, gangly and assured, witty and graceless, sensitive and obtuse, and charming and callow in equal measure.

I was also an emotional iceberg, while at the same time being riddled with the most insane jealousy.

I was, like another ignorant, self-obsessed lover before me, a man who loved not wisely but too well. But, unlike Othello, I was only 17 at the time.

And why am I going back there? Why do I feel the need to relive all these old memories and put them to paper?

Something happened last month, and since then I have found

The Well-Tempered Clavier

that when my mind is idling I start to reminisce. The more I delve, the more it all comes back to me – about the love, about *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, and, above all, about the folly of a schoolboy who, like the base Indian, threw a pearl away richer than all his tribe.

The year was 1982 and the school was Eton College, a seething cauldron of pubescent boys and humming testosterone. It was everything you've heard about it and more. But all you need to know for now is that there were some 1,238 boys dressed up in their black tailcoats, black waistcoats, tight starched collars, stained black pin-stripes and scuffed black lace-ups, and with not a girl in sight.

The school does not have a walled campus but sprawls over the town, and has done so since 1440. By rights it should be busy, abuzz with the everyday activities that you see in parishes all over Britain. But Eton is like some vast schoolboy prison camp where every trace of blooming girlhood has been excised off the face of the earth. Without exaggeration, a boy could go weeks at a time without seeing a single female under the age of 50.

This being the case, the arrival of any young woman into Eton's rarefied male stratosphere was inevitably going to cause a great pulse of interest; akin to a howitzer being fired into the middle of a piranha-pond.

And, as I have already alluded, India was not just any young woman.

That April morning in 1982 when she walked out from the School Hall into the blazing sunshine, it was as if a pristine white peacock had strutted out into a monstrous horde of soiled black crows.

I was 17, with still another year to go before my A-levels. Another rank and file Etonian destined for a spectacularly mediocre school career.

I have forgotten so many things over the years. But of that particular day I can recall everything to the last detail.

It is a glorious cloudless Friday, the second day of the summer

term, with the sun burning high in the sky, leaving my stiff collar wet and a slim trickle of sweat slipping down my back. For once, I am immaculate. My shoes still gleam with first-day-of-term polish, my waistcoat, tailcoat and trousers are fresh from the cleaners, and my hair still hums with the scent of barber's gel.

It's just after 11am and I am in the midst of a pulsating mass of Etonians. We stand on the pavement outside the School Hall beside an ornate streetlight, known as the Burning Bush.

There are more than 100 boys, nattering and chattering, a black wave of twitching adolescence. It's Chambers, the only time in the day when you can be guaranteed to find a master – useful for chits that need signing and work that needs handing in.

Inside the School Hall, the scores of gowned masters – or beaks – are small-talking and sipping tea. When they are done, they exit the hall to face the black-and-white sea of schoolboys.

The tourists, who roll past in their air-conditioned coaches, watch in amazement.

A few of my friends are about, and, like a large well-ordered penguin colony, we all know where we stand in the pecking order.

At the top end of the Eton spectrum is our house captain, the Honourable Charles Savage-Leng, second son of one of Scotland's oldest peerages. He goes by the name of Savage and has the olive looks of a Greek God. He is tall, even for an Etonian, at six-foot-four and his dark hair curls back over his ears. As a prefect, or popper, he wears a wing collar and bowtie, and a resplendent red silk waistcoat with gold buttons.

Right at the bottom of the Eton muckheap are the fags, or F-tits, the 13-year-olds in F-block, scurrying around in their over-sized tailcoats.

And I am squarely in the middle of Eton's panoply of different ranks. Not a member of Pop, nor of Sixth Form Select, nor a member of the Eight, the Eleven, the Association, the Field, The Mixed Wall, or the Monarch. No – I have done nothing of note that might earn me a bowtie and a fancier uniform.

Beside me is Jeremy Raikes, as unkempt as ever, with a thick hedge of black hair that would have had the school barber

The Well-Tempered Clavier

salivating. We joined the school on the same day in 1979, and are destined to leave on the same day in 1983.

There is only one thing to talk about.

The whole school is talking about it.

The whole country is talking about it.

And for the space of two months it dominated our lives: The Falklands.

Those two words access such a raft of different memories for me. The pictures of the Coventry as she died in the sea, heeling over like a stricken beast; the evocative names, Goose Green, Bluff Cove, Tumbledown, Port Stanley, the Malvinas; my first introduction to the Super Etendard jet, the Mirage III and the AM.39 Exocet missile; and a Lieutenant-Colonel, an Old Etonian, shot in the back of the neck and awarded a posthumous VC.

On 2 April, Argentina had invaded those tiny inhospitable islands in the South Atlantic, and within three weeks the Falklands had become Britain's one universal topic of conversation.

I had been devouring the news for many reasons. My father was ex-army and every meal at home had been spent tuned in to Radio Four or the World Service to pick up every morsel of news as and when it happened. But my father and I were viewing the Falklands from polar extremes. He was facing a long and leisurely retirement and would have given his eyeteeth to be there in the thick of the action. Conversely, I was due to become a soldier and...I didn't know what to think about an actual war.

"With all your dad's contacts, you've probably seen the plan of campaign," Jeremy says.

"Of course." I look at his smeared glasses, thick and crusty with grime. "Steam into South Georgia, mop up there and head for the Falklands. Two months, that's all it'll take."

"Two months? Fat chance."

"The Argentinian army is made up of conscripts. Every one of the soldiers is a conscript."

"Whereupon?"

"They're like us, aren't they? Got no option but to be out there. We're packed off to Eton; they're packed off to the Malvinas.

Their hearts aren't in it."

"Interesting. Very slightly interesting." Jeremy pushes his glittering glasses back up the bridge of his thin nose. "Stretching it a little with the conscripts?"

"It's a perfect analogy." I warm to the theme. "We both have to wear a very dull uniform. There's not a woman to be seen. We quickly learn to keep our heads down. And all of us are just obeying orders, though none of us really knows why."

"Though the conscripts probably get better food than us."

"Without doubt."

He fishes around in his stained waistcoat pocket and wordlessly passes me a grimy Polo. "Bet you wish you were out there."

"Don't know," I reply. "Never really thought about putting my life on the line."

He pops three Polos into his mouth, chewing them one after the next. "I thought the army was the family trade."

"Cascading through the generations. Thank you for reminding me."

I scratch the back of my chaffed neck, trying to distil a month's worth of ambivalence into one sentence. For the truth was that, since the start of the Falklands War, I had never stopped thinking about the army, and I was not a jot closer to coming to any conclusion. "There's one thing I dread more than being killed on the battlefield."

"Something worse than death?" Jeremy raises his eyebrows. "Coming back here as a teacher?"

"That would be bad." The Polo snaps against my tongue. "Would I have the guts to kill someone? Would I be able to shoot them in cold blood?"

"Look them in the eye and pull the trigger?"

"Too bloody right." I squint up at the sun, looking for answers. But there are never any answers to war. And in a way, war is almost akin to a love affair, for when they're finished all you're left with is questions. Even years on, you're still asking yourself if you did the right thing, still wondering if you made the right choice. And invariably, because the grass is always greener, you

The Well-Tempered Clavier

come to the conclusion that you did not; that when it came to the critical point, you fluffed it.

Jeremy touches my arm. “Enough of that. Here he comes.”

We shoulder our way through to our housemaster, Francis Frederickson. For eight months of the year, Frankie was our Victorian father, our spiritual counsellor, our affable mentor, our judge, jury and part-time executioner. He probably knew more about me than my own parents; although that may have been more of a reflection on my parents than Frankie.

“Morning boys,” he says as we give him a couple of book chits for signing. He has the look of a jaded police sergeant; his thinning hair greased back straight over his head and gleaming in the sun; his shoe-laces frayed at the ends; his grey suit already crumpled; and his white bowtie just an inch off-centre. “Any news from the front?”

“Nothing since this morning,” Jeremy replies.

“South Georgia, eh? Until a week ago, I’d always thought that was in the Deep South.” Frankie signs the chits with a flourish. “Almost makes me wish I’d signed up for a full 15 years.”

“The Eton Rifles must be a pretty good second though, Sir?” Jeremy says.

“Might have made Lieutenant-Colonel by now.”

“Brigadier at the least.”

Frankie laughs. “Quite so.”

“But it’s got to be more fun ordering us around, isn’t it Sir?” Jeremy continues.

“It might be,” Frankie says. “If you ever obeyed any of my orders.”

He chortles to himself as he tucks his pen away.

Then, as if by osmosis, a frisson ripples through the boys. Not a word is said, but we are aware of an alien presence.

A slight nudge at my elbow from Jeremy and, from looking at Frankie, I find that my gaze is drawn to the huge doors of the School Hall. The collective sigh is just audible.

I turn, I look, and I stare transfixed. All thoughts of Frankie, the Falklands, are erased from my mind.

A woman, a young woman in her early-20s, has glided out of the hall. She stands for a moment on the steps, basking in the sunlight, smiling for the sheer joy of having the sun on her face, and all the while oblivious to the extraordinary reaction she is generating.

Even then, her teeth seem whiter than any teeth that I have ever seen before; lightly-tanned skin that sets off her scarlet lipstick to perfection and that wave of brown hair. She wears a creamy cotton skirt, white shirt and a cream jacket, and carries a small leather attaché case. A total vision of loveliness in a pool of murk.

It's like a physical blow to the stomach. She's winded me. She is the most perfect woman I have ever seen. Of all the fantasy girls that I had raked over in the glossy magazines and lusted after on screen, there is not a single one that could hold a candle to the woman standing in front of me.

I am devouring her with my eyes, searing every detail and every nuance into my memory banks so that, even if I never seen her again, I will always be able to recall that one sublime moment.

She stands on the School Hall steps for just one second, two, and briefly surveys the scrum of schoolboys at her feet. With one click of her fingers she could have had us do anything she pleased.

However, she seemed to have this innocence; a lack of awareness of the effect she was having on the boys before her; a Queen Bee that imagines herself one of the drones.

She flicks her head back, hair streaming behind her, and flits down and disappears into a morass of blackness. I watch her path through the parting tailcoats.

I stare and I stare, wanting to snatch up every moment of this awesome being. When I'm finally quite certain she has gone, I turn back and become aware that other boys are starting to talk again.

Frankie raises an elliptical eyebrow. It means everything and nothing. Jeremy slips his arm through mine and we slope off. I am in a daze, unmasted and unmanned. But there is one sour spot in a moment of unalloyed joy.

Savage makes a point of coming over to us.

“Have a pound in my room by lock-up, the pair of you.”

The Well-Tempered Clavier

“Are you fining us, Savage?” Jeremy says.

“Make it two pounds each.”

“On what grounds?”

“Having a stiffy in public,” Savage says. “School rules expressly forbid out-of-house erections.” He guffawed, the F-tits scattering as he strides through them.

I can think of nothing to say. Savage’s remarks seem unsavoury, like a blunt scratch on a perfect record.

For at that time, the thought of sex together with this woman had not occurred to me. She was so unattainable that the very concept of sex had not registered on the horizon.

“Jerk,” Jeremy says, steering me through the boys. “What a total jerk.”

We have a couple more lessons, or divisions, before lunch – humdrum English and even more humdrum Economics – but not a word sinks in. My mind is on holiday, time and again running over the memory of that woman on the step, her smile and hair toss before she melted into the blackwash of tailcoats.

For three days, I hugged the memory to myself. It was my talisman, my default mechanism. If ever I were daydreaming, up she would pop, standing there in the sunlight. (Although Savage would crop up too; how I came to loathe him for besmirching my perfect memory.)

Nowadays I am more proactive. Nowadays, if I had suffered the *coup de foudre* that hit me outside the School Hall, I would have done something about it. Definitely. Anything at all, rather than just sit passively to await the turn of events. I would have discovered her name. I might have turned up for a few more 11am sessions at the Burning Bush. I might have engineered some kind of casual meeting.

There are many things that, older and wiser, I might have done to effect a meeting so we could have got onto first name terms. But back then, aged 17, the idea of actually doing anything about this woman and of getting to know her better...well, it was as absurd as the notion of me building a space rocket for a trip to the moon.

Absurd.

Ludicrous.

Beyond farcical.

But sometimes, you know, fate likes to lend a hand.

My life has been blessed in so many ways. The best education money can buy; great friends; extraordinary adventures; lucky breaks aplenty.

Yes, a lot of good stuff has come my way.

Some of these things I made happen and some were just down to good fortune. But what happened to me that Monday was the most outrageous, the most remarkable lucky break of my entire life. And it all stemmed from the fact that in those days I was a very modest piano player.

When I was aged ten, my grandmother had died and left me her piano. I'd started to have lessons, but I was not in any way, shape or form a natural piano-player.

By the time I was 17, I'd been having lessons for seven years and I had even notched up a Grade Five music exam. But, like all my other endeavours at Eton, my musical skills were outstandingly indifferent. The school was awash with scores of music scholars and I was not of their number. No, I was one of the musical flotsam that drifted on the surface of Eton's music scene, botching away on one lesson a week.

That wasn't to say I didn't have a few party pieces, some tinkling little numbers with which to entertain the troops – Scott Joplin had always been a favourite and I knew about five of his rags off by heart; Beethoven's Moonlight sonata, without the tricky bits; a brace of Chopin waltzes, along with smatterings of Schubert and Mozart. The selection was not exactly mind-blowing, but to the uninitiated (i.e. someone who had never played a note) they could come across as mildly impressive.

After Grade Five, I'd given up taking the exams but I was still plugging away with lessons. I have no idea why. Maybe because it was all part of my weekly school routine; or maybe because I didn't totally object to the drudgery of practice; or just maybe because it had always been my destiny to be having piano lessons

The Well-Tempered Clavier

that particular summer.

Each week at Eton, I had a few free periods that were ostensibly for study. It was during these times that I had to arrange my piano lessons.

My first lesson of the term had been fixed for noon that Monday and I was edgy. Not because of my general lack of practice, but because I was due to meet my new teacher.

My teacher for the previous four years, Mr Bowen, had quit the school at short notice, and for the summer term I was to be foisted onto some other member of the music staff.

I didn't know who was going to be teaching me but I did know that I was going to be put through my paces – scales, arpeggios, party pieces – so that the new teacher could size up the raw materials on offer.

Another epoch-making event in my life. Click my fingers and I am there.

My house is the Timbralls, though at Eton the houses are known not by their names but by the tutor's initials – in my case 'FF', for Francis Frederickson. The house is just 200 yards from the School Hall and overlooks a great swathe of playing fields called Sixpenny – the fields, according to Wellington, where Waterloo was won. The Timbralls had only one claim to fame, that the creator of James Bond, Ian Fleming, was there as a boy. The entire 007 collection is in the house library and I have read every one of the Bond books several times over.

The Music Schools are a good ten-minute walk away. Out of the house and into Cannon Yard, then past the captured Sebastopol cannon that a grateful old boy, General Peel, had given to the school in 1867. I gave it a lucky slap and made a wish. Past the Burning Bush and right at the lights onto Keate's Lane, named after Dr Keate, the greatest flogger in Eton's history. Keep heading straight and the Music Schools are just opposite the lower boys' chapel. I have made that walk so many times I could still do it in my sleep.

It is another sunny day but now it is more than hot, it is scorching. Not a trace of wind in the air and the sweat seems to

bubble off me. I walk past some builders who are dressed in shorts and t-shirts. The absurd juxtaposition of clothing is laughable – for like all the other boys I am wrapped in the worst conceivable clothes for a blazing summer’s day. But you get used to it, get used to sweating and stinking throughout the summer, just like you get used to all the other mild annoyances that are forced on you at school.

By the time I reach the music rooms, the sweat is dripping off me and my skin is marinating in an oily slick. I can feel my shirt wet under my thick black waistcoat and my cuffs grimy against my wrists.

The Music School is pleasantly cool and dark, a haven after the noon sun. High ceilings, lino floors and scuffed walls, though the smell is just as it is in all the school buildings: the teenage whiff of sweat and pulsing pheromones.

A look at the noticeboard to see who will be my piano-teacher for the term – a Mr James in room 17.

Up the stairs, slicking my wet fringe off my forehead, and down a dark corridor on the top floor. On either side are a dozen boxy practice rooms with a piano in each. The doors all have a small window at head height, and as I walk I can hear snippets of music – a Beethoven piano sonata, a raucous guitar, some scraped scales on a violin.

Room 17 is at the end of the corridor on the left. I can hear a piano being played, being played with an extreme competence I will never possess. I can hear measured trills and a delicate touch.

I don’t know the music, but the style is familiar. It could be Bach. But it’s warm and much more graceful than the mathematical compositions I normally associate with Johann Sebastian. I am charmed.

For a moment I linger outside the room, slowly perspiring in the still air. The music comes to a gentle end and then there is silence.

I tap at the door and, without waiting for an answer, walk in.

I am dumbstruck.

It’s her, the woman from the School Hall three days ago, sitting at the piano not two yards in front of me. Hands lightly on her lap,

The Well-Tempered Clavier

she looks at me, looks me straight in the eye, and gives me quite the loveliest smile I have ever seen, starting at the edges and turning into a full 1,000-watt beam.

I hover in the doorway, my hands clutching at my cardboard file, and, although my brain is spinning at the speed of light, I can think of nothing sensible to say.

“You must be Kim.” She stands up, puts out her hand. “India James. Do call me India.”

India. I had never come across the name before. It is both exotic and lyrical. A name to match its owner.

I shuffle my cardboard file. My fingers are so sweaty that they feel greased. For a second, I think about wiping my hand on my trousers, but I stop myself. We shake hands briefly. The touch of her warm skin is electric. White heat.

“How do you do,” I say, as some semblance of formal etiquette kicks in. New sensations are still exploding in my brain; I take in her clothes, a flowing floral dress and dainty brown sandals; and the scent, a smell that I will forever associate with heaven on earth – lily-of-the-valley; and those hazel eyes with black as black eyelashes; and her moist scarlet lips; and that mane of brown hair which looks even more perfect than the first time I saw her.

I am all too aware of myself, of the stinking tailcoat that I’m wearing and my drenched shirt. I’m not fit to be in the same room as her.

She slips over to a grubby armchair in the corner of the room.

She’s still smiling; in fact, the smile has never left her lips, as if she’s delighted to see me. Can this possibly be happening? It feels like an out-of-body experience.

She gestures to the bench-like piano stool. At this stage, I still can’t bring myself to think of her even as India. She is far too exotic to be human and to have a name. She is just ‘She’ – at that moment, without a doubt, the most astounding, the most extraordinary thing ever to enter my life.

I carefully place my tatty file onto the piano, take a seat, and look at her. All is silence, but inside my head a speeding express train is running at full tilt towards a bridgeless chasm; my brain is

going through repeated galvanic convulsions, neurones are fizzing and sparking, and all I can do is look dumbly into her face, unable to say a word.

But I finally manage a smile, a shy, nervous smile that says: “Do with me what you will.”

India smooths the pleats in her dress and I catch sight of her ankles. They are slim and tanned, criss-crossed with brown leather laces that loop into a bow.

She speaks again and for the first time I notice her voice. A melodic purr that caresses my ears. At that moment, all I want to do is look at and listen to her for the rest of my life.

“So Kim...” She’s said my name again. From her lips it sounds like the most beautiful name in the English language. “Tell me a bit about your music.”

Subconsciously I had started wiping the palms of my sweaty hands on my trousers. Disgusting. Abruptly I stop. I am aware of the sweat dripping off me. My tailcoat and waistcoat feel like a straitjacket.

“Would you...” I start. “Would you mind if I took off my coat?”

“Of course,” she says. “It’s stifling. I’ll open the window.”

As I hang up my tails, she opens the window. Her slim figure is in silhouette against the green sward of fields behind, the sun shining through the fabric of her cotton dress. I can see the outline of her legs. It’s all far too much to take in.

We are seated again, though I don’t know how I found the piano stool. I begin to tell her about my musical career to date. I’m trying to be self-deprecating. I can feel her willing me on, but it’s all just a pile of beans; it’s nothing.

“Sounds great,” she says. I’m rewarded with another smile. “Is there anything you’d like to play?”

I leaf through my scraps of music and find a Mozart sonata that I know well. Only that morning I had played it from memory.

I sit at the bench and rest my fingers on the keys. Is she watching me? Are her eyes staring at the black fingermarks on my starched collar?

I begin to play but I can’t concentrate. I’m sitting alone in a

The Well-Tempered Clavier

room with the most beautiful woman I've ever seen – it is far too much for me to be able to play as well. I have lost all physical control of my fingers. They are so oily that they slip on the keyboard. My timing is shot to pieces. It's horrible.

After a minute, I break down. My brain is simply powerless to move my fingers. I sit with shoulders slumped and hands dead in my lap.

However, there's nothing to be done but have another go. It's not as if I have anything to lose. "I'll try it again." I steel myself for another disaster. Before starting, I turn round to look at her.

But she is no longer in the armchair. Silent as a cat, she has moved to stand at the window, staring out over the fields. A perfect picture of beauty, framed by the lime-green paint of the music room walls. "Take your time," she says.

A deep breath. I breathe in, breathe out, and then take my red polka-dot handkerchief to wipe my fingers. For a few seconds I'm able to focus on the piano and forget the goddess who is standing so close. I start to play. Badly and without emotion, like an ill-tuned machine, a score of missed notes along the way. At least I manage to complete this time.

I lift my fingers gently from the keys. My legs tremor with delayed shock against the piano-stool.

"Very nice," she says. "You've got real potential."

In seven years of piano-playing, nobody has ever said that to me before. I blush, the blood coursing into my cheeks and to the tips of my ears. "Thank you."

"So where would you like to go this term?" she says, still standing by the window. "What would you like to do?"

I have not the faintest idea. What I wanted, more than anything else, was an ice-cold shower and time to think. Everything was happening so fast. I was hurtling pell-mell down a toboggan track.

I stare at my shoes and wish I'd bothered to clean them. "Well..." I reply. I look at her again, full in the face. I would do anything for this woman; I can deny her nothing. "I...I quite liked the piece you were playing earlier."

"The Well-Tempered Clavier?"

I might have heard the name before though I couldn't remember it.

"If that's what it's called." I'm about to wipe my hands on my trousers, but again restrain myself.

"My favourite," she says. "Let me play you some."

And at this, she bends down by the side of the piano and picks up a leather music bag. It looks like a slim briefcase. There are no locks or hinges, just a flap that loops over the trim brown handles. She pulls out a half-inch thick volume, *The Well-Tempered Clavier, Books I and II complete*.

She flicks through the pages. "48 preludes, 48 fugues," she says. "They're known as the 48. Something for your every mood."

"And that piece you were just playing?" I still found it difficult to look her in the face; I had the perpetual feeling that I was not worthy.

She claps her hands with delight. "I love that one," she says, skimming the pages to Prelude 17 in A-flat Major, and then, I still cannot comprehend how, I am sitting in her armchair while she is seated at the piano. Playing *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. For me.

I am spellbound, unable to move, barely able to catch a full breath. It is quite the loveliest music I have ever heard.

The prelude sounds like a babbling brook that ripples and spumes down the side of a mountain before slipping into a sheer, smooth lake. Mesmerising is the only word for it.

I am overwhelmed; not just by *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, but by the sight of India's tanned back, the tresses of hair that curl around her shoulders, and her fingers dancing over the keys. She plays effortlessly. It seems like the easiest thing in the world.

All too soon, the prelude comes to an end. "I love that piece," she says. Before I can reply, she is leafing through the music book. "Let me play you some more. Give you a proper taste of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*."

The notes and trills cascade over my head, prelude after prelude, fugue after fugue. All for me. I can only sit back and marvel. This is so far beyond the realms of my previous experience that my brain seems to glow as it stretches to absorb

The Well-Tempered Clavier

every detail and every sensory trace that lands on my ears, my eyes and my nose. The wafts of lily-in-the-valley, the far-off whine of a lawn-mower, the soothing calm of lime-green walls, the sight of India absorbed in her music, and *The Well-Tempered Clavier* itself, which has now become so elevated in my mind it borders on the spiritual.

As she finally finishes, she turns on her seat, demure hands in her lap, and smiles with genuine contentment. I have to get a grip, blow my nose, do anything to get rid of the tear in the corner of my eye.

I clap very lightly. “I would so love to play like that.”

“Just practice,” she says. “Though I guess it helps if you love the music.”

By chance, she has a three-page copy of the First Prelude. “Something to get you started,” she says, passing it to me as I leave. “My father gave it to me when I was ten-years-old.”

She looks at the front cover.

“It still has all my old notes.”

What a day, what a day. I can remember saying a clumsy thank you before stumbling into the street and back out into the brilliant sunshine.

It was life-changing. In one hour, I had fallen in love thrice over – with a composer, a piece of music and a pianist who seemed touched by God.

PRELUDE 1, C Major

For a glimpse of Eton at its most formal, I will take you to lunch at the Timbralls.

At 1.10pm, the whole house had to be standing in silence by their chairs in the dining room. It was a handsome room with wide bow windows overlooking Frankie's garden. When the hubbub had died down, Frankie would sweep through to the top table, his long gown flowing behind him. He would then take his place by the window and say a simple grace, "*Benedictus benedicat.*"

The 50 boys in the house were sat at five long tables, Frankie was with the seniors, while our Dame, Lucinda – the sole feminine influence in the house – sat with the juniors. I was always stuck with the rabble in the middle.

There were ten boys on my table, boys who through force of circumstance I had come to know better than my own brothers. We were all in the same year, had known each other from the age of 13, and had endured each other's worst adolescent excesses. They were not necessarily my friends, but they were my most intimate acquaintances throughout my time at Eton.

I had other friends from other houses, but these nine other Etonians were the boys with whom I had three meals a day, who helped me out with my extra work and who were the first port-of-call if I were looking for mischief or amusement. They were my allies and my messmates, the thorns in my side and the butts of my jokes. Some of them I liked, some of them I disliked, but there was rarely open warfare. For, like the Argentinian conscripts in the Falklands, we'd been signed-up for a five-year stretch, and we

The Well-Tempered Clavier

knew that life was generally more pleasant without too much fighting.

Our year was split down the middle between the Swats and the Scallywags. The Swats, keen to make the most of their Eton education, were fizzing with ambition. My more natural home, however, was with the Scallys.

Jeremy, it was no surprise, was also a Scally; then there was Gervase Street, plump and unloved, with sadly the worst acne of any boy at Eton; and Richard Glynn, a sprite, phenomenally gifted at languages and art.

And then there was Archie.

“See that headline in today’s *Sun*?” Archie asked. He was wiry, with a pug-dog face and a yapping brisk voice that tended to grate. “*Stick it up your Junta!*”

Richard poured some water for the five of us. “Hilarious.”

“Two fingers to the peaceniks.” Archie wafted his head to the side as an aproned maid placed a plate of stew in front of him. “Bloody Argies.”

“But if we had a peace deal, we might not have a war,” Richard replied.

“If we have a peace deal, the Argies will have pissed all over us.” Archie planted an elbow on the table and shovelled the stew onto his fork. “Wimpy!”

“Nothing like a bit of jingoism to get the country going.” Richard leaned to the side for the maid. “Thank you.”

“It’s not jingoism, it’s commonsense,” Archie said. “Thatcher didn’t have any option.”

“Should certainly see her through the next election, if that’s what you mean,” Richard responded.

“What’s the Falklands got to do with a General Election? It’s a point of principle.” He crossed his eyes, let his mouth go slack. “Duhhhh!”

Richard tapped his fingers together. For a moment he was about to say something but thought better of it. Instead, with a little shake of his head, he tackled the stew.

“It’s principle, see?” Archie ploughed on.

Richard buttered some bread, absorbed by the sight of his sliced white.

“Don’t you have principles?” Archie said, straining forward over the table. The veins were popping out at the side of his neck. “Run up the white flag, why don’t you?”

Richard looked almost like an artist as he precisely spread the butter, working it all the way to the crust.

“Stop being such an oik, Archie,” Jeremy said, to put an end to the conversation.

“Me?” Archie replied. “What, me?”

Jeremy raised his eyebrows at me. For a second his eyelids fluttered, no doubt trying to stifle the urge to hurl his food in Archie’s face.

Archie spooned up more stew. “All I’m trying to do is have a civilised conversation about the biggest story of the year. Don’t you get it? Dontcha?”

“Thank you for explaining that,” Jeremy said. He took a pristine white handkerchief from his pocket and patted his lips before turning to me. “I have always thought it our great good fortune that, when we came to Eton, we ended up in the same house as Archie.”

“We are blessed,” I said.

“He is the daily grit in our lives that helps create the pearl.”

“Grit being the operative word.”

“Or maybe he is the mortar that helps bind our happy band together. He is our common link.”

“Cheers Archie.” Jeremy raised his glass. “We’d all be going crazy without you.”

Archie watched us, eyes twitching from left to right, not sure how he’d been sidelined.

Jeremy scrutinised me and for the first time noticed the dizzy, goof smile on my face. I’d been miles away.

“Something’s happened to you this morning,” Jeremy said quietly. “You look rather happy.”

I could only smirk, hugging my glorious memories close; for to have said anything about India at lunch would have been as if to

The Well-Tempered Clavier

have announced it over the public tannoy.

I raised my finger to my lips. “Later,” I whispered.

All Eton’s boys have separate rooms, and mine, on the top floor of the Timbralls, had one of the best views in the school, overlooking Sixpenny and in the distance another tranche of playing fields, Mesopotamia.

The room was a good size for a 17-year-old, with a shabby sofa, armchair, bookshelves and desk, or burry as it was known at Eton. On the walls were a few posters of my fantasy girls: two of Blondie with her pouting strawberry lips, one of Cheryl Tiegs, and another of Farrah Fawcett. I also had a poster of a large white Labrador. Before women came into my life, dogs had been my first love.

I kicked off my shoes, hung up my tailcoat and lay down on the bed to give myself a few moments of beautiful reverie. Over and over again, I was re-running what had occurred in the Music Schools. I was trying to digest the huge wealth of raw unedited material that had showered my senses. Different pictures of India kept flashing into my head.

I was distracted by the rumbling sound of a boy-call. It started off very low and went up at the end, “BoooyyyUppp”, like a farmer calling his cattle.

For a second my limbs stiffened. It was an involuntary twitch, a hangover from the days when I too had been a fag, running errand after errand for the senior boys, the members of the library.

The boy-calls were as good a way as any to knock any hint of preciousness out of the new boys’ heads. If ever a Librarian needed a job doing, he would stand at the top of the stairs and bellow “BoooyyyUppp”.

Out the fags would come, tumbling from their rooms in various states of undress, all elbows and knees as they tried to gouge their way to the front. They’d stampede up the stairs to line-up outside the library, and the last boy in the queue would be fagged off, or despatched halfway across the school to wherever the Librarian thought fit to send him.

Boy-calls were an incessant part of Eton life, like the deafening jumbo jets that rumbled overhead. You learned to ignore the calls but God they were barbaric.

Jeremy knocked at the door. He came in – as all boys do – without waiting for an answer and flopped down at my burry, his tailcoat scrunching underneath him. He was remarkably cavalier about the general state of his uniform and would think nothing of going out with stained trousers, rumped tails and shirts begrimed with three-days worth of sweat. Though it wasn't as if any of the fairer sex were ever going to be near us. Not in a million years.

Hands behind his head, back of the chair leaned against the wall, and with his feet propped on my burry, Jeremy looked like a London club-man at ease.

“Is it me,” he said, “or are the boy-calls getting louder?”

“I think Savage is using a loud-hailer.”

“All the better to hear him with.” Jeremy began unbuttoning his waistcoat and, when that was done, he started on his shirt. “Tell all then. What's happened?”

The smile stretched across my face. It was only the best thing ever to have happened to me.

But, even at this early stage, I knew that the information had to be protected.

“This is a secret,” I said.

“Of course.”

“No, this is a genuine secret,” I said. “Promise you won't tell a soul.”

“Of course,” he said – and I trusted him. (And thank God I did. But more of that later.)

“Well...” I delicately toyed with the bomb in my hands, wondering how to deploy it with maximum effect. “Do you remember the woman in white we saw outside School Hall last Friday?”

“Comely,” he said. “Delectable.”

“You're right,” I continued, staring at the ceiling to dream of her face. “I met her today.”

“You have all the luck.” He took off his round wire-rim glasses,

The Well-Tempered Clavier

breathed on them and then polished them with the hem of his shirt.

I laid out my cards one by one. “We shook hands; she introduced herself. It was very formal.”

“So what’s her name?”

“India James.”

He looked out of the window, but said nothing, giving me my head.

“She played the piano for me.” I tempted my fingers before delivering the *coup de grace*. “She’s going to see me again next week.”

“She’s your new piano teacher?”

“Correct.”

He laughed, clapping his hands to his face. “*Fouquet in Le Touquet!*”

“Lucked out.” I coolly blew on my cupped fingernails before buffing them on my waistcoat.

Jeremy chuckled to himself as he absorbed the news. “Savage will be green as beans when he finds out.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” I said. “An added bonus. Bet he wished he’d taken up the piano rather than his lousy guitar. He’ll be gutted.”

And so, with all the precision of a clairvoyant, I had unwittingly spelled out the precise turn of events over the next two months.

How different my life might have been if it had not been for Charles Savage-Leng. But maybe, even without Savage’s help, I had always been destined to be with India – and always destined to part.

Jeremy stretched to turn the desk-light on, and off, and on and off, and on and off, and will she and won’t she, until the light bulb started to flicker and spark. “Well, it will certainly get you practising, won’t it? We won’t be able to keep you off the piano.”

And he was right about that too.

The Timbralls had a piano in the dining room. It was nothing fancy but adequate to lead the way for the hymns at

evening prayers.

During the previous four years, I'd practised about twice a week, putting in at best a half-hour session before the next day's lesson.

But that Monday afternoon, my head still spinning with a jumble of snap-shots of India, I played for a full two hours. I'd never done anything like it in my life.

I started with a few scales and arpeggios, four octaves each, just to limber up. My fingers had by now stopped trembling.

Only then did I allow myself to look at the sheet music. India's music, which she had held in her own hands, and which she had owned since childhood.

All afternoon I'd been twitching to have a look. But I'd saved it up, delaying the moment, knowing the wait would make it all the sweeter.

First I studied the cover, in red and black Gothic script, which showed that the music was a classic. *J.S.Bach, The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1, Prelude 1, C Major*. Underneath were the words from Bach's original folio:

*'The Well-Tempered Clavier,
Or
Preludes and fugues in all tones and semitones,
in the major as well as the minor modes,
for the benefit and use
of musical youth desirous of knowledge
as well as those who are already advanced in this study.*

*For their especial diversion, composed and prepared by
Johann Sebastian Bach,
currently Ducal Chapelmaster in Anhalt Cothen
and Director of Chamber Music,
in the year 1722.'*

In the top right corner, written in faded pencil, was her name. India James. I touched the lettering, imagining how she'd been as

The Well-Tempered Clavier

a ten-year-old.

I then turned to the first page. The music was strewn with pencil jottings and several hand-written numbers under the notes. These numbers would have helped India learn the correct fingering – and now, just over a decade later, they'd be showing me the way. Note for note, India and I would be learning the First Prelude together.

On the next two pages were some more pencilled numbers and, at the end, just the one word 'Knock-out!' I liked that.

The back-page had no music, but a short history of Bach and *The Well-Tempered Clavier*.

I devoured it, can still remember it almost verbatim. I was sharing a musical Communion with India.

There are several theories about why Bach wrote his two books of Preludes and Fugues. Some say it's an encyclopedic compilation of every possible type of fugue. Others believe it's Bach's celebration of the better-tuned Claviers that were just being introduced in the early 18th Century.

As for the word Fugue, it derives from the Latin '*fugo*', which means 'flee' or 'chase', and, when you listen to the pieces, that's what they often sound like, one hand imitating the other, hunting it down.

Only when I had committed every detail to memory did I start to study the music itself. The notes were well-spaced, which made them easier to read and, better still, it was in the key of C Major. No black notes.

To explain, piano pieces come in 24 different keys, and these keys vary in difficulty. One of the most difficult is B Minor, which has five flats. The easiest by far is C Major, with not a single sharp or flat in the entire octave. For mediocre players like myself, finding that a piece is in C Major is like seeing a bright-green 'Go' light; it means all the sharps and flats will be flagged up along the way and there will be no hidden bogeys.

That isn't to say that a piece in C Major can't be wretchedly complicated, though when I started to study the First Prelude it didn't look too difficult. I hesitate to use the word easy, but it was

eminently do-able.

For that and that reason alone, it remains one of my favourite preludes in *The Well-Tempered Clavier*; in fact, second only to Prelude 17, the first piece that India played for me.

The First Prelude was also a delightful introduction to Bach. It was a piece of music that I could tackle with a fair degree of confidence. Only later would I discover that *The Well-Tempered Clavier* contains many, many fugues and preludes that would tax even a concert pianist.

And the melody of that first prelude?

It was sublime. Today you can hear it on any number of radio adverts; Schubert used the tune for his *Ave Maria*.

Just like it says on the cover it is, above all, an even, well-tempered piece, each note carrying the same weight and each bar just slightly different from the one before it. Of all the pieces that I've ever known by heart, it remains the only one that I can still play from memory.

The normal routine when you start to learn a piece is to begin with the right hand (usually with the melody), then practise the left hand (with the beat), and only then do you put the two together.

But, like everything else in my life, I am incapable of any such discipline; always I dive in with both hands together, a bundle of impatience, optimistically expecting that everything will work out just fine.

The surprising thing was that, on this occasion, it did. Maybe India's spirit was standing over me as I plonked away in the Timbralls dining room, but, right from the start, the First Prelude was sounding quite similar to how I imagine Johann Sebastian would have first intended. There were admittedly a few fluffed notes but, although I was only going at half-speed, I found I could keep up a steady rhythm.

The great beauty of the Prelude for an amateur is that, until the final chord, the right hand and the left hand never have to play a note at the same time. Above all, it's a very tranquil piece.

Within 30 minutes, I was smitten. I loved its simplicity.

I was also aware of its intimate connection with India. Like me,

The Well-Tempered Clavier

she'd started her *Well-Tempered* career on the First Prelude. She'd have used the same fingering to play the same notes, would have practised the same teasingly tricky bars over and over again, and would have spent a good hour honing the splendid ending.

At times, I was so absorbed with the music that I would forget all about India.

Then something would gun my memory and I would savour the marvellous, the monstrous, events of that afternoon. There were some things, like my greasy hands and my foetid tailcoat, which made me cringe. But for the most part I basked in my memories, sunning myself with the recollection of dappled arms flowing over the keyboard.

Supper, homework, bed at 10.30pm and, when I clicked the light off, I allowed myself for the first time to dream. To fantasize.

But they were chaste thoughts with nothing overtly sexual. With clothes staying on and hands remaining dormant in laps.

Nothing could ever come of it I reminded myself – I would never be anything more to India than another of her gawky pupils.

But, nevertheless, with lips pursed together I blew her a kiss.

The morning alarm rang at 7am and, the moment I woke, I was aware there was something different about the day, that something golden had come into my life. Then I remembered; I remembered India, and in an instant I was skimming through all my memories once more, which were just as fresh as the moment they were first minted.

There was no time for dawdling. In the summer, Eton likes to give its boys a flying start to the day with a division that starts at 7.30am. I had my routine down pat. To have a lightning shave, brush my teeth and don my uniform took 15 minutes.

The starched collar can be a beast for the junior boys when they still haven't got the hang of popping the gold stud through the tight eyelet. But after four years I could do it blindfolded, and could slot home the short stumpy white tie in two seconds flat. The first time I wore a starched collar, it almost felt like a shackle. Its edge chaffed against my skin and the front stud pressed tight

into my neck.

But, like everything else at Eton, you get used to it, and are even left bemused when a gaggle of tourists start hosing you down with their cameras. After just a short while at the school, both the boys and the masters forget what an extraordinary spectacle they present to the rest of the world.

I grab the books and file that I need for the first division, and shrug on my waistcoat and tailcoat in one, doing up the buttons single-handed as I trot down the corridor. To us, the tailcoats were nothing more nor less than a school uniform. Eton's schoolboys had been strapped into this weird garb when they'd gone into mourning at the death of King George III and, so the story goes, some 160 years later they were still mourning the death of Farmer George. I suppose we should have counted our blessings – at least we no longer had to wear top hats.

Cufflinks are also inserted while on the hoof and when I've hit the hall there's time for one quick swill of tea before I'm out of the front door.

Boys have to look the part when they're out of the house, otherwise monsters like Savage take great pleasure in fining them, or administering any number of tedious punishments. Shoes need to be polished black and laces tied; waistcoats must be buttoned, except for the last button which must remain undone (a hang-over from George IV, Georgie Porgie, who was apparently so fat that he couldn't fully do up his waistcoat); the tailcoat has a button, but this is merely for show and must never be used; cuffs must be cuffed; ties correctly tied; socks in keeping with the general assemblage; and hair kempt, well-groomed, undyed, and neither too short, too long, or too *outré*. It goes without saying that all senior boys had to shave.

My early morning lesson was Economics, which, along with Divinity and English, was one of the three A-levels that I was due to sit the next summer. However you slice it, Economics is never going to be a subject that makes your spirits soar.

But, that week, and that term, all my A-level subjects began to strike the most unexpected chords with my personal life.

The Well-Tempered Clavier

That particular morning, for instance, we were being told about the celebrated law of supply and demand. And, as it happened, we had a prime example on our doorstep: when the supply of girls is minimal and the number of boy buyers is vast, then demand will go into orbit.

There would also be a strange synchronicity with my Divinity coursework, but most eerie by far would turn out to be the uncanny connection with my English classes. For the play we were studying that term, and the play that fate had decided to mock me with, was none other than Shakespeare's *Othello*.

Now, I find the spectacular irony of it almost laughable.

Twenty-five years back, it was a very different story.

The Economics division ended at 8.20am and it was back to the Timbralls for breakfast. Whenever I entered the house, I would automatically scan the pigeon-holes to see if there was any post for me and, for the first time that term, there were some letters.

One was a plain white card from my father with a second-class stamp. Tiny black writing, clipped and precise, it was a match for the terse army orders that he used to issue. It read: 'I have found that you snapped the stylus of my record player. Your allowance has been docked accordingly. In future, I'd be grateful if you could inform me of any breakages. D.'

Charming. I had indeed neglected to tell him that I'd smashed his rotten little stylus. But there are ways and other ways of reacting to your son and heir smashing a piece of your property.

However, my father was forever incapable of making the stretch from treating me like a junior subaltern to treating me like a son. I was inured to it all. But I still hoped that one day he might be able to unbend enough to sign one of his curt postcards with the word 'Love'.

There was also a second letter, which was expensive blue and altogether more interesting. As I studied it, my heart gave a twitch. A round girlish hand, written in brown ink, and when I put it to my nose I could scent a trace of lavender. On the back, there was the outline of pink lips and the letters 'SWALK'.

I didn't know the writing. But I knew who'd sent it.

Thrilling. In an instant, all trace of my father had gone from my mind.

I raced upstairs and only when I was in the privacy of my room did I open the envelope – not with my finger, but slitting the edge with a pocket-knife.

My hands were shaking. At first I scanned it, eager to find out if I was still in favour or whether I had been supplanted by some other schoolboy love.

But after a few seconds I could relax. The first words, 'My dearest darling Kim', and the close, 'With ooooodles of love', gave me the reassurance I needed.

Taking my time now, I started to read the letter again, soaking up each word, each nuance. I read it once, reached the end and went straight back to the beginning to read it a third, then a fourth time.

She'd written, just as she'd said she would. She was more than up for continuing our fledgling relationship via the Royal Mail. And, when next we met, it seemed there would be more kisses and more hugs. There were even dark hints as to the possibility of...other stuff.

Estelle.

It is true that at the age of 17, I could fancy any teenage girl that came within ten yards of me. Just being in close proximity to a girl could make me shiver with delight.

Not that I knew what to say to them, or how to behave when with them, for that was one area where my Eton education had sadly let me down. But, although their presence turned me into a clueless geek, I loved girls. Any girls.

This said, Estelle was not just any girl. She was 17-years-old and gorgeous, long brown hair in a ponytail, flawless creamy skin, and a trim, perfectly endowed body that had left my eyes on stalks the first time I saw her in a swimming costume on the beach in Cornwall.

The previous month, our families had been staying at the same Cornish hotel. I had spent two days gawking at her from afar,

The Well-Tempered Clavier

before one morning she'd taken pity on me and started to chat. I blossomed. On the last night, at the hotel disco, we had kissed in the corner. It was my formal introduction to girls and the many delights they had to offer.

Estelle had promised to write, but it was by no means a done deal.

So when I read that letter and realised she'd come good, I was euphoric.

Then and there I replied, returning all her hugs and kisses tenfold, and sowing the seeds for our future together. But I didn't declare my undying love. I didn't want to slay my golden goose.

It was the first time I'd ever sealed a letter with a loving kiss and I posted it after I'd snatched a couple of slices of toast for breakfast.

Estelle! I was a fizzing bottle of champagne, ready to explode with joy.

I know that my attitude may seem fickle; that one moment I should be putting India on a pedestal and blowing her night-time kisses and the next I am fawning after my holiday romance. But that's boys for you, and not all of them grow out of it.

Like almost every other straight 17-year-old boy in the country, I was obsessed with the idea of women in general and girls in particular. I could effortlessly transfer my allegiance from one to the other and back again without a moment's hesitation. My brain was like a fat bumblebee, buzzing from one flower to the next in a perpetual quest for more honey.

Besides, India – stunning, elegant India – could never be anything other than an idle fantasy. Estelle, for her part, almost qualified as a girlfriend. We had kissed and she appeared to be eager for more.

That was the realistic view but there were also certain practicalities to be taken into account, the main one being that Estelle was stuck miles away at Cheltenham Ladies' College. Although her letters might offer me some crumbs of comfort, she was out-of-sight, and therefore usually out-of-mind. Conversely, it was India who was on my doorstep; it was India who, day in,

day out, would be stalking through my dreams, plucking at my heart-strings, and firing my soul.

That morning I had a Divinity class, and, like the earlier Economics lesson, it resonated. It made sense. Or more accurately, I made it make sense for the peculiar world that I lived in.

Not that I appreciated it then, but the schoolroom where I was taught Divinity has a quite staggering history. It sounds unbelievable to think of it now, but it really is the world's oldest schoolroom. It is called Lower School and it is in the very heart of the college, just adjoining the schoolyard. Thick wooden beams, long black desks and benches, and two rows of oak pillars, all of it more than five centuries old. Outside, through the small diamond windows, you can just make out the statue of Eton's founder, Henry VI, and, behind him, the enormous buttresses of the upper chapel where the game of Fives was invented.

Lower School came in the colours of black, brown and grey, and the desks were thick with carved graffiti and the names of generation after generation of other bored Etonians. I remember the dust, how it spangled in the stagnant air.

Nowadays, the sheer weight of the room's history seems magnificent. I would love to be back there, back in that dusty, dark room with the ghosts of Wellington, Shelley, George Orwell and Aldous Huxley.

But back then – as with so much of Eton's incredible history – the fact that I was being taught Divinity in the world's oldest classroom barely even registered. At the time, I was far too pre-occupied with India and Estelle.

There were about five boys in the class and our teacher that day was one of Eton's resident priests, Giles Swann. Our subject: St Paul's letter to the Romans.

Now, as it happens, the entire Reformation and the breakaway from the Catholic Church stemmed from St. Paul's epistles. In particular, there was one 16-word text in *Romans* that turned more than a thousand years of Christian theology on its head.

The words themselves seem bland in the extreme. But when

The Well-Tempered Clavier

Martin Luther first re-interpreted them, they sparked off an explosion that was felt – and continues to be felt – throughout the Christian world.

This is what St. Paul wrote: ‘That through faith alone you shall be justified in the eyes of our Lord Jesus Christ’. Nowadays it is known as ‘justification by faith’ and for millions of Christians it meant they could abandon the Catholics’ predilection for sin and confession. Luther had discovered a much simpler route to Heaven – that since we are all unworthy, faith alone was enough to merit God’s love.

The moment of Martin Luther’s revelation is known as his ‘Tower Experience’. He suffered from chronic constipation and while he was on the lavatory would pore through his Bible. It was here, in the tower, where he had his revelation with *Romans 5*. (Catholics, naturally, say that Luther mistook the moment of physical release for a numinous experience.)

My Tower Experience came in Lower School. My Epiphany was equally blinding.

When I made the connection, it was like a thousand flashbulbs exploding in my head at the same time – Justification through practice.

I, too, was unworthy. But, through practice alone, I could earn India’s favour.

Through practice, I could win her esteem.

It sounds crazy. But in that moment it chimed.

The way forward had been revealed to me, and it was to be down the serene path of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*.

Then and there I made a commitment.

I was going to practise till my knuckles ached and my fingertips were red-raw.

And, for a short while, I did.

One of the great joys of Eton in the summer is the huge expanse of afternoons the boys have to themselves. For four days a week, they have a clear five hours to swim, to play games, to do whatever whim took them. The hijinks only ended when they had

to be back in their houses at 7pm in time for roll-call, or Absence.

The junior boys had a number of formal sports sessions laid on, cricket for the dry bobs and rowing for the wet bobs. But I had never taken to team sports. I preferred tennis, or a quick round on Eton's nine-hole golf course. Or, ideally, I preferred frittering my afternoons away in a haze of wanton idleness.

That afternoon I chose to spend in the Music Schools. Partly, I suppose, because there was an ever-so-slight chance that I might catch a glimpse of India. But there also happened to be a couple of practice rooms that had Steinway grand pianos, the genuine article, tuned to perfection. Arrive soon after lunch and even a rank amateur like myself could get to play on a Steinway.

Since there are no more lessons, I've changed into jeans and t-shirt. It's spitting with rain. In my hands, clutched tight to my chest, is my file of music and my Holy Grail, the First Prelude. I treat the building with all the reverence of a temple, for it is here that I have come to worship my Goddess. There is not a soul about, not a sound to be heard, and I have my pick of the practice rooms.

It's been a long time since I've played a grand piano. The room is double the size of the other practice rooms, but still comes in the Music School's ubiquitous lime-green. Despite the rain, I open all the windows.

I lift the polished black lid and caress the keys, which once were white but are now yellowing with age. It's a beauty. When I start my scales, the sound fills the room with an explosion of music, so loud that you'd hear it across the street.

From memory, I play that same wretched Mozart sonata that I messed up the previous day. It's note perfect – of course it is, because there is nobody listening to me. I try the sonata again, faster, and my fingers rattle out the trills and the tearing scales.

I'm warmed up, fingers loose and arms relaxed. I place the First Prelude on the stand. My fingers flex and hover over the keys, middle-finger of my left hand ready to strike the first note, middle C. I start slowly, sticking religiously to India's fingering. The ending goes awry, so I try it five more times before I have it

The Well-Tempered Clavier

perfected. Then I'm away, playing the First Prelude for the first time in its entirety. I dab at the damper pedal; it sounds better if you let the notes run into each other.

It is more beautiful, by far, than anything I could have hoped for.

And then from nowhere, a sudden distinct prickling at the back of my neck. I am not alone.

A light knock at the door, the handle turns, and my heart lurches into my throat. It's her, India, looking lovelier than ever. The reaction is every bit as severe as it was yesterday when first I met her. I'm paralysed.

India is not just smiling, she is openly laughing. As she walks into the room, she is clapping. All I can do is stare like a drooling village idiot – but how else could I react when I am being lauded like this?

She stands at the end of the piano, fingertips light on the lid, and looks at me with this dancing smile on her lips. Her hair is glistening from the rain. I'm melting inside, my heart and brains turning to mush.

"You play much better without me," she says, and again starts laughing.

It's yesterday all over again. India has rendered me into an inarticulate, grunting oaf. "Well...thanks."

"You must have been practising for hours."

There are so many things I could say, but all I can do is stare at my knees. "Er...yeah."

She walks round the piano and looks at the music on the stand. She's standing not three feet from me. I can smell her lily-of-the-valley. Lift my arm and I could touch her.

She looks at the First Prelude. "Strange to see this in front of you," she says. "No one's ever played this sheet music but me."

"I love it," I say. A bit crass, a little clunky.

Out of the side of my eye, I can see she's wearing brown trousers, a cream shirt and a lightweight creamy mac, speckled with rain and cinched at the waist.

She's gliding back to the door now. "Better get that order in for the complete *Well-Tempered Clavier*," she says, hand on the

door-handle. “Wouldn’t want you twiddling your thumbs next Monday.”

Now that she’s almost gone, I can feel myself relaxing. It’s as if she needs a four-yard exclusion zone around her – any closer and I start to burn up inside. “Thank you,” I say, and a question occurs to me. “How did you know I was here?”

She laughs again. How I came to love that laugh. It lit up her eyes and made her hair dance.

“I could hear you out on the street,” she says. “It was lovely.”

And with a wave she is gone and I sit there in stupefied silence, my mind reeling from the onslaught of the previous five minutes. I chew my thumbnail, still not comprehending what exactly has happened. My Goddess not only heard me on the street, but found me out, praised me, laughed with me.

And there had been one other thing that she’d done when she was in the room.

Just a small thing, hardly anything at all, but even at the age of 17 I was aware that her action was maybe, just maybe, charged with a bat squeak of sexual chemistry.

As she’d stood at the piano, she had frouffed up her hair, sweeping it from one side to the other. It wasn’t a come-on. It definitely wasn’t flirting. But it would have been described by an anthropologist as a ‘preening gesture’. These are not necessarily sexual, but, like my favourite key in C Major, they are a green light for ‘Go’. It is usually a woman saying without a word that she would not mind seeing more of you.

PRELUDE 2, C Minor

When I wrote that there were 1,238 boys in the school and not a girl in sight, I was not being strictly accurate.

There were two girls at Eton: both masters' daughters, both in my year and both, by yet another outstanding piece of good fortune, in my English class.

Angela was my personal favourite, with her short tartan dresses and boyish Eton crop. She had a long fringe of brown hair that she used as camouflage so she could surreptitiously inspect the 20 or so boys in the room. I knew this because the class was sat in a horse-shoe shape around Anthony McArdle's desk and for two terms I had been sitting directly opposite her. We rarely spoke, as there were many other boys in the class who were more overtly desperate for her attention. But occasionally we would catch each other's eye, at which I would always be the first to avert my besotted gaze.

As for Marie, she was a blonde, an enthusiastic darling with wavy hair. She, too, had realised there was much to be gained from wearing mini-skirts and sheer stockings. Although Marie and I talked much more than ever I spoke with Angela, she always sat two seats to the side of me, which meant I never had the opportunity to survey her body in the same minute way that I could with Angela.

Before Estelle, and long before India, Angela had been my real-life fantasy girl of choice.

As the beak droned on about Gerard Manley Hopkins ('No worse there is none, pitched past pitch of grief...'), Shelley ('Hail