

## The Teacher & The Lady With 'Bette Davis Eyes'!

Terry first set eyes on 'her' in a foreign land in June 1994. She was dressed in a pure white blouse - spotlessly clean, cared-for and, he imagined, fresh and crisp to touch. The fineness of her hair was instantly noticeable, as if newly washed, and had been cut, then styled, into a neatly rounded bob which had been lovingly highlighted with subtle hints of hazel and blonde. He could not guess her height or size at this stage, because she was sitting down and, in fact, he kicked himself mentally for not noticing her earlier when she must have brushed past him within the *melee* of his students entering the class. But he noticed 'her' now, very clearly indeed and, from this distance, she appeared to be somewhat delicate in demeanour, not necessarily lithe, but most definitely feminine and *petit*.

In contrast, Terry was wearing a year-old olive green shirt which had seen better days, and, as if pouring paraffin onto a bonfire in readiness to burn Guy Fawkes, he regularly soaked himself in cheap French aftershave he'd purchased at the local airport's Duty Free. His hair had no style. In fact, his hairline was receding and had been deliberately trimmed in such a way as to hide its retreat. And, as for his demeanour: sadly, not even daily exercise could convince anyone to gamble on staking a claim that he was simply 'big-boned' and therefore 'well-proportioned'.

And now, as Terry chanced to look over at 'her' across his busy classroom, a strange image flashed through his head - he imagined grabbing two large handfuls of freshly-ironed white bed linen, pulling the whole bundle tight into his face and slowly sniffing its aroma, then inhaling it very deeply - drawing its essence into his being - and without warning, sinking his incisor teeth into its soft resistance and devouring it whole - fragrance, cotton, stitching, immovable stains - the lot! And, when he came back round to his senses, re-invigorated by the image that had prompted a sudden rush of blood to his head, he still found himself continuing to stare across the class, straight through her friend sitting close-by and firing arrows through his eyes directly into 'her'. He hoped at that moment that she had not noticed this unwarranted and wholly aggressive invasion of her innocent and private learning space. But on the other hand, he pondered, maybe, just maybe, she, too, might perhaps avert her gaze away from her books for a second or

two and momentarily steal a glance back at him? Needless to say - she didn't.

That evening Terry was delivering the first 'voluntary' lesson of sixteen with 'her' present in an over-packed classroom which lacked any form of natural ventilation as, whenever the window was opened, the traffic noise emanating from the maelstrom outside was so disruptive that concentration levels were disturbed to the point that nobody could hear themselves think! And, as a result, the atmosphere inside this man-made oven was not only hot, but humid and stuffy too. What didn't help matters was the fact that he knew the majority of his students had not really come to learn English at all. They were, in fact, there for other reasons related to enjoying three hours of innocent social liberation, meeting friends, mixing with members of the opposite sex, enjoying a chat with 'westerners' who, they believed, like museum exhibits, had been flown in for that very purpose! On the whole, he guessed, they just wanted to be part of an artificially created in-crowd for a fleeting few hours in a country that had, in its past, frowned upon such outlawed types of progressive behaviours. But, just for that morning, afternoon or evening lesson - depending on slot allocation - social liberation beckoned them as their vehicle to self-betterment in a publicly acceptable, open, 'safe space' - and all of this they could achieve in the name of learning English.

But she, she seemed different. Much older, more elegant, less sociable, obviously intelligent and, he noted instantly, extremely shy - to the point, he thought, of abject pity. But, who was she? What was 'her' name? Why had she come to his class on this day? Why did she want or need to learn English? Terry had absolutely no idea, nor, indeed, did she seek to offer any personal information about herself. She just sat next to 'her' friend, in silence, passively staring at the photocopied worksheets with pen in hand - not often attempting to write with it, mind you, but, on occasions, placing it between her lips and slowly chewing its top.

After two hours had passed, and the class entered into its final 45-minute wind-down session, all and sundry warmly welcomed this artificially orchestrated construct which had been brought about by a combination of his and their fatigue, apathy and boredom with the subject-matter. So, Terry

would set up a topic to talk about and they would provide the information. Easy for him, as he could switch off his brain and switch to automatic pilot. And, in truth, even with 'her' present, the lesson overall had not really been any different to the others. The students were dutifully respectful, worked when they wished and completed most of the easier tasks he'd set. Rarely did anyone speak - unless spoken to, or the topic was suggested - and, during the lesson, his attention was not drawn to 'her' at any time at all except for when he was staring at 'her' as he was devouring his imaginary feast of laundry linen and washing powder aroma. Now and then, however, he would still make a mental note to check whether she had returned to her seat after each comfort break. But, basically, he just carried on teaching, while she continued reading the photocopied worksheets on 'her' desk in front. It seemed to him that she was simply too shy to look up even, let alone speak.

After the session had exhausted all of Terry's available energy and that stubborn timepiece on his classroom wall had finally indicated that it had succumbed to the inevitable passage of time, everyone present was mightily relieved. In fact, some students had been staring at it for so long that, when they got up to leave, they appeared to sleep-walk through the door as if they'd been hypnotised! As for the fatigued teacher: well, he just packed up a few of his papers, said goodbye to those students who caught his eye on the way out and, snake-like, slowly slithered away out of view stealthily disappearing into the thronging crowd on the boulevard situated below the seventh floor of his classroom.

And so, Terry now waited on that crowded pavement - alongside other exhausted pedagogues - all breathing the same insalubrious air, all helpless victims of the never-ending traffic noise and, of course, all desperate to get away from the city centre as quickly as possible. And when one of the many bendy buses that passed by - too crowded to take on more passengers - finally did stop and gather him up, his body was transported three kilometres to his run-down ramshackle apartment which he shared with two other fellow unfortunates, even though his mind, well, his mind remained with 'her'.

And now, in his own district with its wider roads, all-night restaurants, friendly buffet owners who gave him credit and a fire station where he played volleyball with the shift-workers, Terry's head continued thumping from his latest nine-hour stint as an entertainments' officer in this second-rate, money-spinning extravaganza that was masquerading as a legitimate language learning facility. But, despite his semi-comatosed state, he still possessed enough of his senses to wonder where she had travelled to that night, and if, in fact, anyone was waiting for 'her'.

And when Terry finally entered the refuge of his own tiny room, which only contained enough space for a single bed, one creaky wooden chair and a portable, zip-up wardrobe, he collapsed wearily on top of his unevenly sprung mattress which meant that he then automatically rolled to one side like a stricken ship listing. And there, as he thought long and hard about his teaching day, he noted that, yet again, nothing much had happened - except that he had seen 'her'. She was different. In fact, he surmised, as he lay there staring up at the ceiling through the semi-darkness watching a small spider hanging upside down and attempting to cling on desperately to the end of its own thread - she was *very* different. He saw it, he felt it, he knew it, he understood it and, deep inside his heart, he truly believed it. But, he asked himself quizzically: Did she see it? Sense it? Feel it? Know it? Understand it?

Well, the truth is that Terry never did find out, because, like so many others who came to those first 'voluntary' sessions before deciding whether to sign up for a sixteen-lesson course, she never did come back. However, on that particular evening, when she had graced his classroom with 'her' presence, as the lesson finished and she rose from her seat, he remembers vaguely that she may just have glanced towards him, albeit briefly, from across his emptying classroom, as if to say 'thank you' for the lesson - before she, too, made her way out and returned into the featureless desert of anonymous city life. But, now, thinking back – Yes! Terry was absolutely certain that during the brief moment - when 'her' gaze met his, for that one short-lived split second - he had, indeed, thought to himself that - were he to have written the 1981 hit song (*She's Got*) *Bette Davis Eyes*, then he would most certainly have done so – just especially for 'her'.