

## **Music Lessons**

**By**

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On rainy days like this one, I used to ride my bicycle, which I had bought for two pounds from a boy up the road, into Watford for my music lessons. These were on Tuesday afternoons, at three thirty, and they entailed me leaving school at three o'clock, three quarters of an hour before school ended. I think this reduction in length of the school day influenced my early decisions about learning the piano.

Mr. Graves lived in a road called Carey Place, which was just past Rossi's Ice Cream Bar in the High Street. It was a very thin road at first, suddenly turning a sharp right angle to reveal a little street full of houses joined together in terraced fashion.

Number 82 was not a terraced house, but stood alone and I used to wheel my bike up the path and ring the bell of the side door. While I waited for an answer I took my music case off the bike's crossbar and sheltered under the porch from the rain, which often used to soak the bottom half of my short trousers, so that they were dark grey and crinkly.

Mr. Graves would let me in and say hello through his moustache. The house smelled. No house I knew smelt like this one, a dusty old smell that reminded me of blue and white china, Chinese paintings, umbrella stands, dark curtains and all the things that I found old and established.

The house wasn't really from my life at all – it was something that I had missed. I am sure that in times gone by women had thrown tea parties here, worn their long dresses with tassels, danced the Charleston and had a gay time.

Mr. Graves used to show me through to the room facing the street, which was his living room. Winnie, his tabby cat, used to quickly jump up to sit on the warm piano stool as soon as it was vacated. Graves loved to pretend to cuff him, and the cat would run to the scullery looking very guilty.

I would sit on the stool before the upright piano and unload my music case, which was always a source of bother. The damn thing never closed properly and many times I'd collected the sheets of music off the road or in this case, his floor.

Graves was old, very old. About eighty I think. He used to examine my report book and look at the exercises he had written there the week before for me to practice. Then came the big rigmarole of playing it all. I used to learn the music by heart, in order to be able to watch my fingers, instead of the music. We would go through all the scales, major and minor, then the set pieces played from a great thick grey slab of a book called "The Tutor". I'd play a piece, he'd criticize it and then show me my next exercise.

When he played his yellow hands flicked over the dirty ivory keys and he'd be singing out the notes all the time. The veins on his hands stood high and proud, pumping blood to fingers which seemed more alive than the rest of him.

At four o'clock he used to make tea for us on a gas stove in the kitchen. While he was gone I would stroke the cat and play with the metronome. Gas lights shone outside in the streets where it would be getting dark already. I would think of the journey that I had to ride home, it felt so cold riding in my short trousers.

He would put tea cups on a table next to the piano and talk about composers, making dreams for me. His eyes went away sometimes and when he had a clear memory his voice would bark excitedly and he'd spit in my face with his words. I didn't mind, I loved him.

The first time I came to play I was nine years old. When I did something wrong he used to say "Oh No, oh No, No, No" and I used to cry. He never became angry or shouted, just very disappointed that I wasn't his grandson, who had his gift for playing the piano.

My friend Jim used to have his lesson before me. Jim was two years older than me, much taller, with a mop of ginger hair and freckles. If I was early for my lesson Jim would still be having his, so I would have to sit and wait in a leather armchair in the hall. Poor Jim, he'd play his best, then Graves would say "Now James, let's try it again from the last rest." Jim would give an exaggerated sigh, and although I couldn't see him, I could imagine his big shoulders lifting and his hands wanting to flatten ten notes at once!

When I was eleven years old I changed schools. I started at secondary school in Watford and would often pass Carey Place when I walked up the High Street. But I didn't have my piano lessons there any more, for one day a man had knocked on our front door and said that Mr. Graves had died. I wondered what became of his cat Winnie?

I then transferred to the Watford School of Music and lost all interest in the piano. Now, when I remember the lessons there, it seems that it was always winter. I can't recall a summer playing the piano.

I remember cycling home to Carpenders Park from those lessons in Watford. It was okay cycling back down the High Street hill, through Oxhey to Watford Heath but when I reached Oxhey Lane, there were no street lights in the countryside at this time. My bicycle lights were so weak that I expected to be hit by a car from behind at any minute. After a while I used to ride on the footpath for safety's sake. In the dips in the road, Scotch mist used to lay, frosty cold making me hold my breath. My legs were chapped by the wind and at each turn of the pedals they rubbed the music case, which was strapped to the bicycle's cross bar. I used to see vague monsters in the hawthorn bushes and I was glad to see the bright lights of the St. Meryl estate, welcoming me to where we lived. I used to save some chewing gum or a sweet to suck when I reached the top of Carpenders Avenue which was in the estate road lights. I suppose they were like a reward for me, pedaling so hard through the darkness of the main road behind me.

Nothing seemed very important then, just the knowledge of a coal fire at home, some hot buttered toast, my mother and her warmth. She'd hold me to her, my face pressed into her chest, ask me about my lessons and look at the report that Mr. Graves had written about my efforts. With her dreaming of me playing before packed hundreds in Town Halls, saying, "That's my son" to the people sitting next to her, I'd smile a special smile I reserved only for her.