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SF PERUSALS

CLOUDS

by

MICHAEL FRAYN

SAMUEL  FRENCH

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CLOUDS

First presented by the Hampstead Theatre Club at the Hampstead Theatre, London, on August 16th, 1976, with the following cast:

Owen	Nigel Hawthorne
Mara	Barbara Ferris
Ed	James Berwick
Angel	Paul Chapman
Hilberto	Olu Jacobs

Directed by Michael Rudman

ACT I

SCENE 1

Cuba

Or, at any rate, an empty blue sky. Beneath it, the stage offers a simple arrangement of slightly different levels, some of them making a step high enough to be sat upon

Six chairs and a table. The table is arranged as a desk, with one of the chairs behind it, and another in front, sideways on, waiting for visitors. The other four chairs are arranged in a row at one side, as in a waiting-room

Owen is standing by the visitor's chair, in front of the desk. He is a middle-aged man who has been a professional journalist all his life, and who has adopted a sceptical character to protect himself from his own profound susceptibility. He is wearing an open-necked shirt and no jacket. He is also curiously bent over, with his head twisted downwards and sideways. This is because he is trying to read, upside down, the papers on the desk; something that becomes clear when he straightens up, looks round to make sure that he is unobserved, and edges discreetly round to the other side of the desk to read the papers the right way up

Enter Mara. She is in her thirties, and is subject to moods which shift from brilliant vitality to inert melancholia. At the moment she is in the former phase

Mara *¡Buenos dias!*
Owen Ah. Good morning!

He picks up a fan and fans himself, to explain his presence on the wrong side of the desk

Mara (*enunciates carefully*) I am late.
Owen (*likewise*) I am hot.
Mara I sit outside.
Owen I come in here.
Mara I close my eyes in the sunlight.

Owen I find no-one.
Mara I cannot move.
Owen Now I am cool.
Mara Please forgive me.
Owen *Buenos dias.*
Mara *Buenos dias.*

They shake hands

I sit on the Malecon, with the sea on one side, and the white towers of the city on the other, and my head is full of light.
Owen My head also.
Mara And now at last on such a day I believe it: all things are possible.
Owen I believe it also.
Mara Under such a sky, civilizations commence. In Egypt. In Greece.
Owen Now here in Cuba!
Mara And you speak English.
Owen I speak English. (*He draws out the chair behind the desk for her*) Please!
Mara (*gesturing to him to take the place himself*) Oh, please, please!
Owen No, no!
Mara Yes, yes! (*Smilingly indicating the visitor's chair in front of the desk*) I—here!
Owen (*smilingly accepting this arrangement*) Very well. Then I—here! (*He draws up one of the four waiting chairs, so that they are both sitting on equal terms in front of the desk*)
Mara I am happy to be here in Cuba.
Owen Good. I also am happy to be here in Cuba.
Mara I am happy that you are happy.
Owen In my country, we hear many lies about your country.
Mara With us, the same.
Owen Yes?
Mara I think that is not good.
Owen No, not good.
Mara I think that is bad.
Owen Very bad!
Mara Bad, bad, bad!
Owen I am here to tell the truth.
Mara Good! I also!

Owen I want to tell it like it is!
Mara Yes! That is good! To tell it like it is!
Owen It is an expression we have.
Mara We too!
Owen Yes?
Mara Yes!
Owen Then we tell it like it is—together!
Mara That is how people should always be.
Owen We show them how to do it.
Mara You speak English very well!
Owen (*laughing at the joke*) You too!
Mara (*laughing*) Yes?
Owen Yes!
Mara We shall get on well, then!
Owen Very well! Very, very well! I feel it!
Mara I also!
Owen Your country is famous for its beautiful women!
Mara Yes?
Owen Yes! Now I see it with my own eyes!
Mara People say that the men in your country are very passionate! Is that so?
Owen We have a certain dogged persistence that seems to go down quite well in some quarters.
Mara (*her special manner disappears abruptly*) You're English.
Owen And full of dogged persistence!
Mara Oh God.
Owen Sorry?
Mara Is there anything worse than speaking a foreign language to someone who turns out to be English? Yes—speaking English to them very slowly and distinctly.
Owen (*his special manner evaporates, too*) You mean you're . . . You're not . . . Are you English?
Mara Of course I'm English.
Owen Oh God.
Mara Not a good start.
Owen I'm sorry. I just assumed . . .
Mara Naturally.
Owen If you're in Cuba, and you have an appointment with someone in the Ministry of External Relations, you naturally take if for granted that they're . . .

Mara Of course.
Owen I'm sorry.
Mara Please.
Owen Obviously, if you stop and think about it, there's no reason why the Cuban Government shouldn't have English people working for it.
Mara Who's working for the Cuban Government? You're working for the Cuban Government?
Owen *I'm* not working for the Cuban Government. I assume *you're* working for the Cuban Government.
Mara *I'm* not working for the Cuban Government.
Owen You mean . . . you're just waiting for the bloke who deals with the press?
Mara Obviously.
Owen I see.
Mara You're also just waiting for the bloke who deals with the press?
Owen Obviously.
Mara I was supposed to see him at eleven.
Owen I was supposed to see him at eleven. They rang me at the hotel this morning.
Mara They rang me at the hotel this morning.
Owen I must say, I didn't realize it was going to be some great press jamboree for all and sundry.
Mara No, the message I got said nothing about a jamboree.

Silence

Owen You arrived last night, did you? On the flight from Madrid?
Mara There weren't any other flights.
Owen I didn't see you on the plane.
Mara I didn't see you.
Owen I haven't seen you on these jobs before.
Mara I'm not a journalist.
Owen You're not a journalist?
Mara Why should I be a journalist?
Owen Well, I naturally assumed . . . It seemed reasonable to suppose . . . But you're not?
Mara I'm not.

Silence

Owen So what are you, then?
Mara I write books.
Owen Books? What kind of books?
Mara Oblong books.
Owen Novels?
Mara Obviously.
Owen Have I heard of you?
Mara Oh God.
Owen No, I mean, tell me your name
Mara Hill.
Owen Susan Hill?
Mara No.
Owen Lucienne Hill?
Mara Lavender Hill.
Owen *Lavender* Hill?
Mara Mara Hill.
Owen Mara Hill . . . Mara Hill . . . Mara Hill . . .
Mara Don't keep saying it. Each time you say it, it sounds more unreal.
Owen Tell me some titles.

Mara sighs

Go on.
Mara (*looking at her watch*) What's happened to him?
Owen I may have heard of them.
Mara He said eleven.
Owen I can't see any point in being coy about it.
Mara It must be ninety in here.

Silence

Owen *To Where I Lay Dying*. Yes?
Mara Yes.
Owen You see?
Mara See what?
Owen That I've heard of you.
Mara Yes. Good.
Owen Girl on the cover wearing a bridal veil?
Mara Yes.
Owen And nothing else?
Mara Small gold crucifix.

Owen I didn't notice that, I must admit. *To Where I Lay Dying . . .*
Mara Or at any rate *Sighing.*
Owen *Sighing?* She's lying sighing, is she?
Mara Yes.
Owen Not lying dying?
Mara No.
Owen *To Where I Lay Sighing?*
Mara Right.
Owen Nice title. I think my wife may have read it. She's quite keen on that sort of thing.

Silence

To Where I Lay Sighing . . . Dying . . . Dying?
Mara *Sighing.*
Owen *Sighing.* Yes. *To Where I Lay Sighing.*
Mara Please don't keep saying it.
Owen Anyway, you've come to take a look at Cuba. Not a bad idea. Man I was talking to on the plane last night was telling me that the Cubans are a very passionate lot. Surprising amount going on at the weekend in the sugar cane. Might make a rather good setting for your kind of thing. This your first trip?
Mara Yes.
Owen They're all the same, these places. Russia, Egypt, Pakistan —it's all the same kind of set-up. Government car. Guided tour of collective farms and irrigation projects. National folk-dance company. Interview with the Minister of Tourism and Fishmeal Production. Kindergarten where they line up and sing you a patriotic song. Well, look, you go along with it for a couple of days, just to humour them, just so they can't turn round and accuse you of starting off with a hostile attitude. Then you put the boot in. Insist on seeing the jails. Get into the refugee camps. Really make a nuisance of yourself . . . Look, if you like we could combine forces. Once we get off the collective farm circuit we'll find bags of good material for you. My name's Shorter, by the way. Owen Shorter. I'm doing it for one of the colour mags.
Mara (*emerging from her deepening melancholia*) One of the colour magazines?
Owen Don't say it in that tone of voice.

Mara One of the Sunday colour magazines?
Owen What's wrong with that?
Mara Oh my God.
Owen Oh, come on! I can't bear people who make snobbish remarks about the colour mags. They all read them. Look, I shall do a rather nice, rather well-written, rather up-market piece. Bit snide, perhaps. Bit fancy. Bit *wry*. Well, you read both of them, like everybody else. You know the kind of thing they go in for.
Mara I hope I know. I'm doing it for the other one.

Enter Ed. He is American—an able, cheerful, energetic, older man who speaks fluent Spanish. Like Owen, he is wearing an open-necked shirt. He rushes straight into the room and shakes hands with both of them as he talks

Ed *¡Lo siento! ¡Perdoname! ¡Me pegue a las sabanas! En casa no me llaman porque nunca duermo. Pero cuando llego aqui duermo de maravilla. ¡Es fantastico! ¡Me siento en casa aqui! ¡No se si es el aire, o el ambiente!*
Owen Yes, good, nice to meet you. (*Urgently*) Look, this is very embarrassing. It shouldn't have been allowed to happen, and I blame your press chap in London for not warning either of us . . .
Mara Does he speak English?
Owen Oh God . . . Do you speak English?
Mara Do—you—speak—English?
Ed Sure I speak English.
Owen Well, look, in our country we have a *competitive press*. This lady and I are working for newspapers which are *in competition* with each other.
Mara Capitalist press.
Owen I'm not defending it.
Mara Very bad.
Owen Terrible.
Mara Not like in your country.
Owen But it puts us in a very difficult position to find that we're writing about the same thing at the same time. It affects us as ordinary workers in the newspaper industry.

Ed grins

He doesn't understand.

Ed laughs

Mara He understands.

Ed My friends—don't worry! No, no—you're in Cuba now, and in Cuba all things are possible! We'll fix it somehow! We'll divide the country up between you. You take the east—you take the west. You take the sugar industry and art—you take coffee and literature. There's plenty going on here. You can each cut yourself a piece and come back for more. What do you want to see? What are you interested in?

Owen (*inhibited by Mara's presence*) Well . . .

Mara (*inhibited by Owen's presence*) Well . . .

Owen What I had in mind was a kind of . . .

Mara A sort of . . . overall . . .

Owen Rather general kind of . . .

Mara Impression.

Owen Yes, an impression. A general impression.

Mara What I was thinking of was more a kind of *personal* . . . well, yes . . . general impression.

Ed Two personal general impressions. O.K. Two personal general impressions coming up. Let's do it like this. (*To Mara*) You take the role of women in Cuban society. (*To Owen*) And you take the mechanization of agriculture.

Mara I don't want to do anything about women.

Owen I don't want to see a lot of collective farms.

Ed All right. (*To Mara*) How about the movie industry? Who are the new directors? Is the star system possible in the socialist cinema? (*To Owen*) For you—the weather.

Owen The weather?

Ed Do you realize what's happening here? The whole climate of the island is being changed! As soon as the current irrigation schemes are finished the Cuban people are going to have total control over their environment! How about that?

Mara I really just want to meet some . . . people.

Owen I think I'm more interested in the people angle.

Ed People? You'll meet people! You'll meet people like you've never met people before! Is this your first time here? I envy you, seeing it for the first time! Look, let me tell you something. There's one simple but vital fact about this country

that you might as well get straight now, before you start: this is the greatest place on earth. Right? If you just keep that in mind you won't go far wrong . . . Where are they all? Out cutting cane? You wait here. I'll go find the *compañero*. We'll get it all set up for you. Regard this whole trip as a summer vacation.

Ed exits

Owen Oh God! Public relations men!
Mara He seems quite helpful.
Owen They're *all* helpful.
Mara He speaks good English, anyway.
Owen They *all* speak good English.
Mara Isn't he American?
Owen They're *all* American.
Mara What?
Owen As long as he gets us to opposite ends of the island. That's all I care about. You realize that people are going to be making jokes about this every time we set foot in the office?
Mara Set foot in which office?
Owen Yes, I suppose it's all right for you. You're not a professional. No-one expects professional standards. But I'm what they call a working journalist, and if I'm going to keep my job I have to maintain a minimum level of professional competence. I'm certainly not expected to come back from some highly expensive foreign assignment sharing my story with a horde of lady novelists. I'm not trying to be offensive. I only wish I had your talent. But there is a painful difference, often obscured by popular prejudice, between reporting something and making it up. Proper reporting involves getting quotes down accurately. Spelling names right. Checking. Then checking again. Boring, meticulous skills that you don't learn by writing fiction. It also involves coming face to face with the real world, a very muddled and overcrowded place where nothing has its name on it, and everything is somehow the wrong shape to be expressed in language. And if something is difficult to say, you've still got to say it. You can't just say something else instead, which I suppose you always can in a story. Even if it's a story as distinguished as *To Where I Lay*

Sighing. Dying. Sighing. God, it's as hot as a bowl of soup in here.

Ed returns with Angel. He is a Cuban in his mid-thirties, also in open neck and shirtsleeves—a sleepy man who chain-smokes and always has something wrong with him

Ed (*to Angel*) . . . *Acaso no entendimos el mensaje, pero hemos estado esperando aqui, en de quince* . . . (*To Owen and Mara*) Here he is. This is the man. Angel. Angel spelt "angel". An appropriate name, because he's going to be hovering over you like a guardian spirit for the next ten days. Angel, this is . . . (*To Mara*) I don't know your name . . .

Mara Hill.

Owen Mara Hill.

Ed Mara. Mara here wants you to arrange for her to meet some people. Maybe some people in the movie industry . . .

Angel nods sombrely, and makes a note

Mara (*anxiously*) No . . . no . . .

Ed (*unperturbed*) Some people in the women's organizations . . .

Mara No . . . no . . .

Ed Some youth people—some trade union people . . .

Mara No . . .

Ed Some of the old prostitutes . . . (*To Mara*) You know they have special places here where they rehabilitate the hookers? That could make a nice piece . . .

Mara No . . . no . . .

Ed Take her to meet some of the hookers, all the same. And my friend here, whose name is . . .

Owen Owen.

Ed Owen . . . he wants to . . . What did you want to do, Owen?—he wants to see the irrigation schemes . . .

Angel continues to nod and note

Owen I do *not* want to see the irrigation schemes!

Ed (*to Owen*) They're changing the whole *climate*! It's the biggest story in the world, and no-one's got on to it yet!

Owen (*with ill-grace*) All right. All right. I'll look at the irrigation schemes.

Ed (*to Angel*) He'll take the irrigation schemes. And show him the ballet and the Central School of Art, too. But look after these people, Angel! They're friends of mine. And they represent very important British newspapers. Right?

Angel nods

Ed (*to Owen and Mara*) Right? Right? Right. Now, would you excuse us? Angel and I have to caucus a little to discuss *my* problems.

Owen Your problems? Why, do you want to go and look at the irrigation schemes?

Ed (*aside to Owen and Mara*) No, I want to try and meet one or two people like Sergio del Valle and Jose Abrantes in MININT. No use to you, because you don't speak the language. Come on, Angel, let's you and me go see the chief. (*To Owen and Mara*) He'll be right back to fix your schedules and arrange transportation for you. (*He shakes their hands*) So long. Glad to have met you. Hope I've been of some use. We may meet again some place in the island. People have a way of running into each other here. But don't forget, whatever you look at, this place just has to be the best there is. *¡Hasta la vista!*

Ed goes out

Angel (*to Owen and Mara*) I think you wait here, please. I think I come back.

Owen Just a moment. Who *was* that?

Angel That? That was Mr Budge.

Owen Mr Budge? And who's Mr Budge?

Angel I think he is friend of yours.

Owen We've never set eyes on him before. He must be a friend of *yours*.

Angel No. I think he come here yesterday from United States. I think he come here to write a book about this country for the University of Illinois.

Owen I see. Who are *you* doing it for? *Playboy* magazine?

Angel I think I am not writing about this country. I think I am only living here.

Angel goes out

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