

Gaddafi in Hythe

[i]

SPEAKER:

Jenny. Jenny.

[ii]

SPEAKER:

It's just faintly possible that some among you have bought into the idea that storytelling is the be-all and end-all of communication, 'specially when it comes to radio and podcasts and all. Aye, we're all sitting round the campfire and exchanging yarns; and the yarns stretch back to eternity, or so we tell ourselves. And we are all part of the yarn, like the newly darned sock that has retained its identity despite all the darning. But the truth of the matter is that all of us, all the folk gathered round the campfire – which is not a fire at all, more likely a telly, or a big wooden table with a fondue set set upon it, cheese or chocolate bubbling all the while, while our glasses of white wine, of pinot grigio, seem to engage in the kind of intimate embrace which our bodies, our flesh and blood, would never countenance – all of us, *each* of us has barely any purchase on time; and no knowledge of how one goes about *creating* Time. The idea of eternity, meanwhile, merely indicates that childish notion of stuff that happened before we were born and might still continue to happen after we die. Two states about which we can categorically say nothing of interest whatsoever.

So our parents appear immortal to us – and this must be one of the reasons their death is so hard to comprehend. And what goes on once we also have shuffled off *the mortal coil*, whatever that actually means (I find it hard not to think of a “slinky” toppling endlessly down the vast wooden staircase at primary school, but that reveals an immaturity of mind I'd much prefer to hide) - what goes on exists in a realm of pure fiction... the landscape and details of which are as an hallucination!

And yet the landscape does emerge, fitfully, at times – at those times when time seems to stand still. And it is one of those occasions that comes to mind now...

And so to a story. Trouble is, speaking personally, no matter what the story, I always

turn to the last page to find out how it's going to end. I tell myself that the thing that interests me is the process, the unfolding of the narrative, the engineering feat. I like the bit at the beginning, where (say) a woman is cut to pieces or a man is forced to kill himself by jumping from a bridge or an animal breaks out from its cage and goes berserk in a provincial zoo (these are scenes we've all imagined, witnessed, or willed into being at some time or other, after all! Scenes in fact that are completely banal!). And I like too the slow unwinding of the plot, so called, in which the tiny details appear, the kind of trivia that makes you think your own life is not entirely trivial. But the thing that ruins it (for me at least) is being forced to plough the barren field of bogus social commentary, convoluted intrigue, sentimentality, clunking dialogue, cute characterisation, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

That is why I always turn first to the very last page. I don't want a surprise. I want to trace exactly, as if I were myself a novelist, a storyteller, the route which leads the reader to the "reveal" - the denouement. I'm happy enough with Hitchcock's MacMuffin, but I don't want any of Marcel Proust's madeira, if you know what I mean.

Looking through *this* script, briefly, because we haven't properly started yet, not really, I may as well tell you now that it ends with some incomprehensible reference to "banging techno." No idea how we get there. Myself, I suspect a sleight of hand.

Okay, here we go...

[iii]

SPEAKER:

Sunrise. The rolling countryside. Fields. Sheep have been here. Romans too. And soldiers, World War One era: each has left their traces in the landscape; and we set out to take a gander from the summit of the low hill at the base of which lies our campsite for the night before, the boozy night that's only now fading from memory. Morning on a dry enough day; and we're striding up the hill through thick and knotty grass, mostly indistinguishable from what I take to be amethyst sea holly, with its tough purple flowers - I don't know anything about plants but these are those tallish thorny things that look a little like they're trying to turn into the crown jewels and tear away at your trousers as you try following a track made by the sheep that are grazed on the land from

here to Rye. We climb over the fence at the top, which takes some negotiating, the others need my help. And we then walk along a broad muddy path that leads us to a style. The clouds are moving fast now and the wind has left a group of lads sat round the style completely weather-beaten. They're lost, their Prince of Wales outing or something of that kind, has gone horribly wrong and they're miles from their intended destination. We tell them how to reach the farmhouse, where they can get water and follow the road back to the village. They trudge off, utterly deflated, dehydrated, while we ascend the hill, on the ridge at the top of which we sit to contemplate the landscape. From here you can see for sixty/eighty miles in each direction - the remains of the fortification tell us it used to be an important military site. Objects – houses, fences, a church, some pubs, cars, a railway line and so on (even a herd of llamas) appear tiny and still, like fine details in a tapestry. Silence hangs forever in the empty grey sky. Then out of nowhere – for the far side of the hill is sheer and you can't properly see down it – a small boy with a tiny dog appears, a devilish dog with sharp little teeth. The boy too has the air of an imp about him, Victorian doll's teeth in a wicked grin and thick black eyebrows like Butch Patrick's. No sign of any parents – and his demeanour is instantly disturbing, like a passing electrical storm but close-to, small-scale, something thrown up by the earth here at the top of the hill. He wears a plain blue shirt buttoned at the collar, shorts, long socks, and I can't remember what shoes... as I'm frankly terrified. The puppy nips us and runs circles round the boy, who laughs, his teeth rattling in glee. Then they're both off, disappearing down the hillside, vanishing from our sight. We don't look after them, we don't dare: instead, by common consent, we head off in the opposite direction and all agree we've been visited by something strangely evil, arising from and tied inextricably to the landscape.

[iv]

SINGER:

From cowpoke to Cooper

From Peter to Pooter

From fetus to Potus

From weaner to whiner

From tulpa to pooka

From fable to Farber

From weather to water

From poker to paper
From waiter to water
From father to Faber
From Reno to Tulsa
From Potus to Pooter
From cowpoke to Cooper

[v]

SPEAKER:

Years pass. Which is not to say they are rolling forward. In my mind's eye I see Muammar Gaddafi, improbably enough, looking at his reflection in the countless red-framed mirrors on ground floor of the lighthouse at Dungeness. These are arranged so that an entire platoon of Gaddafis appears as he steps forward and checks his tie out of habit, then vanishes in a trice as he heads for the stairs and, pausing, looks up. The stairwell takes the form of a craggy fibonacci spiral which the elegant column of the tower doesn't suggest at all from the outside, and which most people do not notice, set as they are on reaching the top where there's a viewing platform, a kind of rudimentary balcony, if you like. Gaddafi has come to Kent for an infantry signal instructors course. "Signals" includes radio, the wireless as it was then, telegraphy, field cables, the lot. Not waving flags, though it's tempting to imagine semaphore conducted by the squaddies, Gaddafi among them, standing on the Martello Towers along the coast at Dymchurch. But still we see him in a series of unlikely enough scenarios: he's squashed into a tiny carriage on the Romney-Hythe-and-Dymchurch railway, unable to see the humour of the situation. He's sitting in a stifflingly twee tea room, eating Victoria Sponge, unaware that he's meant to leave a tip. He's floating tranquilly along the Royal Military Canal at the speed of a swan, tranquil and unthinking, no knowledge of Keats to complete the reverie, just guns and radios and ordnance. He's caught in traffic at the roundabout where Station Road meets the A259. And we see him walk up the hill at the back of the inn to St Leonard's Church, in the crypt of which he finds hundreds of human skulls and human bones stacked to the ceiling. All these images suggest a propensity for portents, but in fact everyone who comes here, to Hythe, will have experienced the same and will have left without thinking that their entire life was written in the narrative these scenarios suggest.

SPEAKER:

The little old lady who greets us in St Leonard's wants to take us round the ossuary. She first shows us an enormous hexagon of wood which has served as a tabletop but was intended as a sounding board at the back of the pulpit so the sermon could be heard, or so she says. The assassins of Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury and the subject of Eliot's *Murder in a Cathedral*, a signed copy of which my father gave me, visited the church en route to commit the famous murder; and the old woman refers to them as "those rascals," as though they had just left, having stolen a few apples from the nearby orchard or having knocked over someone's beer at the The King's Head.

On his death bed my father was mostly silent and withdrawn - and had imploded both mentally and physically. His brain like a flickering lightbulb, he repeated just the one word, over and over. His eyes were watery and indistinct, he hadn't shaved or been shaved in weeks, and his always wild hair now lent him the air of an old and broken animal, which I suppose is what he was. "Jenny," he said, whoever Jenny might be. As I sat holding his hand – his knuckles were notably large and looked as if they had been carved from wood or ivory, his fingernails (like his teeth) were hard and yellow – he struck me as simply the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen in my life.

But that's just to set the scene for something far more curious, something to do with storytelling and about the only thing of note that I can contribute to the subject. And this arose some while later, completely unexpectedly. You can imagine, or will have experienced yourself perhaps, the grief that accompanies a loved one's death; culture is full of such profundities. I found myself devoid of philosophical armour, crazily distraught, as usual largely unprepared and exposed as a fatal bumbler. Imagine my surprise, then, years down the line when not a person, but a pair of soft toys belonging to my daughter should cause my heart to drown once more like a cat thrown in a well. The circumstances were hardly unexpected and you'd think they scarcely merit recording. She was growing up, rapidly. One day, I thought to myself, pretty much each time I had to rack my brain for a new tale to tell, these night-time stories must come to an end: *and then she'll be sad*. What a fool not to have predicted that it was me, rather, who was sent into a paroxysm of grief when she cancelled, after an eight year run, *The Adventures of Bear and Bun-Bun*.

"Have you wanted me to stop telling you stories for a while now?" I asked

- “Yes, but I didn't want to hurt your feelings.”

“My feelings!... What about Bear and Bun-Bun's feelings?”

I didn't rush from the room, throw myself on the bed and burst into tears. But I bit my lip as the tide went out forever and the place in my brain where the characters had taken root was vacated forever. Surely they were immortal, had achieved a kind of immortality. Like Balder, still they were cruelly killed off. I was confused for days. “There's nothing good about being middle aged,” the doctor told me, once more refusing me the pills.

[vii]

SINGER:

If I should disappear
Blame it on
The bloke from Elbow
Yeah, hunt Guy Garvey down
Armed with clubs
And staves and guns

Inside his denim shirt
In the folds
Of his jean jacket
You'll find my bloody corpse
Track him down
And show no mercy

*We're in a handcart bound for hell
No one left to toll the bell
Tell my folks that I feel swell
Though they've nationalised Adele*

If I should disappear
Call the cops to
Get Chris Boardman
Inside his black sports bag

You will find
My body parts

Chase him across the land
He can't get far
He's on his bike
Don't trust his earnest face
Mow him down
And run him over

Mow them down
And run them over

[viii]

SPEAKER:

I stand on the roof of the Redoubt at Dymchurch, a flag in either hand. Dressed in the bulky costume of a soldier from the Napoleonic Wars, I'm sending a distress signal though one arm, my right, is bloody and broken from a musket shot. On the Martello Towers I can just make out, if I squint and use my imagination, two figures, frantically waving back, their flag work sloppy and uncoordinated, as if they are making it up as they go along. My mind is in a fog and I don't recognise what it is that they're signalling. But through the smoke that arises from the burning boats and despite the distance and the chaos of the battle, I recognise the figures – one a brown bear about eighteen inches tall, with black eyes and a label for a tail; the other a white rabbit about the same size, with long floppy ears and a sad pink nose.

I turn at a sound behind me. Four knights from another time step forward and move towards me, their swords drawn; and in their blades I see the fear in my face reflected, a dozen times, two dozen, countless times – and so on to infinity, the blood-cold images flickering madly like the blades of a descending helicopter drowned in the ascending din of banging techno.

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