

Never Dark

It was the car alarm going off just outside in the street which woke him. It didn't sound like his. He lay there listening to its two-note modulation pitched between squeal and blare, squeal and blare, and again and again and again. Panic alarms, was that what they were called? That was what they sounded like. Especially at night, amplified by darkness. Panic and alarm. In regularised soundwaves. And in equal measure. Each volley of noise identical to the last, so that each new one was a diminishing shock but also, eventually, an increasing expectation.

He lay there listening to it.

Just as he thought he was going to start screaming in ululating unison, it stopped.

He lay there listening to it. The silence. For a moment the two-tone commotion seemed to continue, in some ghostly auditory after-image. Then there was calm. His wife's breathing still hadn't altered. But he was awake again. He was awake and already exhausted, the bleak exhaustion of the early hours. The longest hours before it's even light.

How early was it?

He groped for his wrist-watch on the bedside table. When he turned the face towards the window there was just enough of the drab orange light from the streetlamps to make out the hands. It was ten to five. Ten to five, and he was exhausted. Late to bed and early to wake. Makes a man healthy and wealthy and

Ache. Bake. Cake.

No.

Dake. Eake. Don't exist.

Fake.

Stealthy, unhealthy and fake.

He lay there listening intently to his wife's breathing, knowing that she too was awake, was only feigning sleep. But her breathing didn't alter. He was exhausted. But as always when he was conscious at this hour - and lately it seemed he was conscious at this hour more and more often - his mind was seething.

One of the finest minds of the century.

Perhaps the greatest mind of his generation.

Constantly engaged in the constant search for. Truth. Honour. Freedom. Justice between men. The reason why we're here.

FADE IN on APPLAUSE.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to tonight's special, commemorative edition of *Desert Island Discs*.

"Our castaway tonight will be familiar to some of you, especially those of you - friends and celebrities - who are in the invited audience here. But to those of you who are watching on television nationwide, he may be less well known.

"In fact, he's hardly what might be called a household name. Not yet. But that, of course, is part of the justification for a programme like this. In fact, when I agreed to host this programme, to take over from Sue Lawley, that was the one condition I insisted on. That from now on we'd spend less time in giving free publicity to the already and, it has to be said, often undeservedly famous, and start paying some attention to the unjustifiably ignored.

"And, as soon as that was decided, the first person I thought of to initiate this new programme was our guest tonight, Guy Hughes.

APPLAUSE

". . . Guy Anthony Hughes. One of the finest brains of the. Constantly engaged. The reason why we're here. . . "

APPLAUSE

Yes.

"A very good evening, ladies and gentlemen. *Bonsoir, mesdames et messieurs. Guten Nacht, meine Damen und Herren*. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this very special celebration coming to you live on tv, in front of a celebrity audience, here in the BBC Television Centre

the Barbican
the Albert Hall.

Tonight's events are to be broadcast simultaneously, on a number of channels, to our friends in Europe and the U.S.

“We’re here tonight.ladies and gentlemen, to honour one of our most celebrated. . .”

Now his wife too was awake. Or rather, moving. As he’d suspected, she’d been awake all the time, timing her breathing to feign deep, uninterrupted sleep. Now she’d decided to come to consciousness slowly, as if out of hibernation. To move. She murmured something, pushing a hand against his side as if to thrust him gently from the bed.

“Car.”

“*What?*”

“Your car. See if your car’s alright.”

He lay there, his mind seething at the interruption. She pressed her hand into his side again, more softly, as if to mitigate the request.

“Go on”, she said indistinctly.

“It’s a different alarm.”

“Go and look.”

"Do you think I don't know the sound of my own alarm?"

He lay there. He knew the sound of his own alarm. It was the whine in his head. Blood pressure, was it? Almost too high-pitched for human hearing. Except at night when you lay still and listened. Was it always there?

“Just go and see.”

He knew he'd know no peace until he'd done what she said.

“For fuck's sake,” he said savagely.

He threw the bedclothes back, swung his bare legs out of the bed and padded across to the lit curtains. Their bedroom window was never dark, even when the curtains were drawn.

He stood in the bay and stared down at the street. Cars were parked along both pavements, his own still angled between two others as tight to the kerb as the skill of long practice at backing into spaces not quite generous enough could achieve. He could even see

the red light of its alarm system winking off and on in the nearside window.

“Is it alright?”

He said bitterly, "It's still fucking there."

He stayed at the window, gazing down into the street. There was no one, no movement.

“What’s the matter?” his wife called.

“Nothing's the matter.”

“Come back to bed. You’re keeping me awake.”

Her voice was irritable. And, just as, a minute earlier, he'd resented her pretending to be asleep, now he resented her alert wakefulness. Even when he woke up at five in the ack fucking emma he couldn't be alone.

There was already a dull grey light behind the roofs. He stared out. The Biblical phrase bowels of exhaustion came into his mind. That was how he felt. Exhausted, but faintly costive. Hollow but inwardly burdened. He stood looking at the houses opposite, regretting, as he did often, how the tone of the street had been lowered by various neighbours, mostly recent incomers, effecting what they thought of as improvements: style-less renovations done on the cheap. His was one of the few houses in the street which still had the brick frontage unstuccoed, the skewback arches still intact. And his was probably the only one with the original wooden sash-windows. Most of the other houses had replaced these with double glazing, with aluminium or white PVC frames. The one directly opposite now even had lozenged panes, glued-on strips meant to resemble leadwork. It was a house whose owners had left nothing to chance in the effort at prettification: it had Elizabethan windows, a Georgian front door, and the rucked curtains in the front windows were raised in the middle, like a lady's skirt over an instep, a coy style meant to resemble Victorian. Worst of all, the brickwork had been faced in contoured imitation-stone cladding, in random cream and pink. He never saw it, even in this dead orange light which universalised everything, without loathing for its owners, a pair of shell-suits with two children and a Toyota whose name he didn't even know. They didn't even have the sense to realise that original fabric

was what appreciated, not make-overs done by jobbing cowboys from the back of a white van.

He despaired of it all sometimes. He despaired of it all all the time.

No: hated it. After the scientific conquest of scarcity and life's ceaseless filth came a teeming human crassness, fuelled by the pauperised imagination and the credit-card, and indomitable as the MRSA virus.

And they'd done it in full view of his front window.

He let the curtain fall back into its folds. His wife moved, and groaned. He stepped from the window-bay, which was largely occupied by the dressing table. It had three mirrors, pale upright rectangles: a broad one in the centre and a narrow one either side. Their proportions, and the angle at which the side-mirrors were set, corresponded to the big front window and raked side-panes in the embrasure of the bay itself. The mirrors stood at a slight backward tilt to show the face and shoulders of someone seated on the buttoned stool (which was now fitted into the narrow space left between the two sets of drawers for the sitter's legs). Not that anyone ever did sit there, so far as he knew. His wife usually put her makeup on in the bathroom, where the light was good and she could stand scrutinising herself in the mirror above the new half-octagonal washbasin, assuming (he had often thought with irritation) that searching, hard-eyed expression with which she tried to make herself more glamorous.

In fact, the dressing-table mirror was almost never used as it was designed to be - by a seated woman with her makeup accoutrements in front of her and whatever else she needed in the shallow drawers to hand at either side. The mirrors were, in this sense, of less importance than their plywood backs, which acted as screens, to reduce the sense that the windows of the houses opposite looked into the bedroom. However, by reflecting the back of the room and expanses of the ceiling, the mirrors did help to give the bedroom an illusion of greater volume, as recommended for small rooms in those magazines - *Home and Garden*, *Period Homes*, *Country Life* - his wife was always reading on some envious compulsion of

dissatisfaction and a lifetime's longing for a tall cream townhouse or a country pile.

Sometimes, though, he himself used the dressing table. Stood in front of it to button a shirt, perhaps. Or just to look at himself.

He did so now, as he stood there in his underpants and vest.

Looked at himself. In the large central mirror first, though he was reflected in the side mirrors too, as in a triptych.

No, he thought. Triptychs were usually hung flat to the wall.

This angled arrangement was more like one of those hinged icon screens that could be stood with its wings set open, at a slight rake, facing outwards. Or they could be closed like doors on the central image of the godhead.

He drew his stomach muscles in tighter, pivoting to see the improvement, first in the big mirror then in the other two. It struck him that this movement resembled the preening motions of a body-builder showing off his development, as if for several cameras, that fixed grimace of teeth above it. Like the yellowed grin in a dead horse's skull. That was one of the drawbacks of being an artist, he thought: you saw yourself as objectively as a hanging side of meat.

And not just an artist:

But a sculptor of increasingly international renown

A photographer, magisterial exponent of the candid shot, snapper of unconsidered trifles. ("He is my master. His work has taught us all to see." - Henri Cartier-Bresson).

And, in recent years, a maker of some of the most fascinating and provocative short films on video ever to have

"What are you doing?" his wife hissed.

She flounced over in the bed like a glove picked up and flung down anyhow.

"I've got to get up in a bloody hour!" she complained.

He went back to the bed and slipped into it on his side. His wife flounced over again, as if to ensure her back was to him. He lay there looking up at the ceiling, which to his eyes by now seemed almost lit from the curtains.

He listened to his wife's breathing. It slowed. Then it was almost inaudible, as if she'd stopped breathing.

He lay there.

“By the way, ladies and gentlemen, perhaps it’s time to share a secret with you. This is the first time that Guy Hughes and I have ever met. Isn’t that true, Guy?”

“That’s absolutely true, Kirsty.”

LAUGHTER.

“But of course it’s also true that I’ve known *of* Guy Hughes by reputation - known your *work*, I mean - for many years, and it’s one of those funny things, but I have to admit I’ve always sort of *felt* I knew you. I mean, I’d never even seen a photograph of you - because I know you shun the camera, you’ve always hated publicity and so on - but I already had a mental *image* of you. I’m babbling, aren’t I?”

LAUGHTER

“No, it’s true! I did! You know, the way you have an image of someone sometimes?”

“So do I measure up to it?”

LAUGHTER.

“No - I mean, yes!”

“You were expecting a taller man?”

LAUGHTER.

“I mean, you’re very different. Shyer than I’d imagined. You’re more reticent, let’s say. But more *imposing*, somehow. Are a shy person?”

“No. Not really. I don’t have time for shyness. But I’ve always hated arrogance. Vanity. Self-importance.”

“Yes, you see that in so many stars. But you’ve never sought the spotlight?”

“Never. I’ve always seen that as a weakness. As a form of inner doubt.”

“But, as I say, many of us feel we’ve known you through your work for many years. You’ve been an icon for so many people in the arts. But it’s only now, isn’t it, that you’re starting to get the sort of international reputation, the sort of media attention -”

“Stop twitching!” his wife hissed furiously. “I’m going to start sleeping in the other room if you keep jerking about like that!”

He lay there, his mind shocked at the sudden interruption. One of the finest minds of. An icon to so many. The sort of media attention he was starting to.

He lay there. He had the idea for the triptych. A triple self-portrait. Himself as if reflected at slightly different angles in three mirrors. He lay there thinking about it. Visualising it.

Or what if he used the dressing-table itself? (With the three self-portraits replacing the mirrors?)

An icon screen.

The whole concept incorporated into an installation, adapted out of a cheap white dressing-table bought from MFI or B & Q. And built of MDF. Medium density fibreboard, with a sagging back and plastic knobs. Furniture for the modern boudoir. Which of them had chosen it? And why? He supposed it was the kind of cheap furniture they'd bought when they first got married. The kind you could break up in your hands if you ever chose to, if your rage at the modern age and the built-in decrepitude of its artefacts ever took you that far. In fact the fucking thing was already falling apart, not so much from actual use or wear as from the weight of its own flimsy components. The runners to two of the drawers had dropped, so that instead of sliding in and out each drawer collapsed on the one underneath when you tried to open or close it. And the side uprights moved if you pushed them, the rectangular boxes which framed the drawers swaying into parallelograms.

It was the perfect cultural symbol for post-Millennium Britain.

But for an artwork that would last, he wanted something more substantial. Not antique, nothing pretentious. Just plain, strong, simple. Something from the Thirties or Forties. Or wartime Utility ware, okay, it was only oak veneer but underneath it was well-made and solidly-built in pine or deal, with a back of three-ply board and tenoned drawers on fitted wooden rails. You used to be able to pick up stuff like that in junk-shops for a few quid. Now, of course, it was probably fashionable again. People had had enough of self-collapsible furniture, built to last only as long as most marriages did these days. Or only as long as the couple's residence on some raw jerry-built honeymoon estate of "first-time buyers", before the act of

moving it to a new address - a bigger mortgage, or one of the couple moving out when the marriage broke up - shook it apart in the removal van.

No, solidity was coming back, he felt. And he had an instinct for these things: for style, taste. He'd have to flick through *Traditional Homes* or *Period Living*, old issues of which were scattered all over the house, in collapsed piles under the sofa or slippery and dangerous underfoot as patches of ice on the living-room or bedroom carpet. He rarely opened them except when seated on the lavatory. But his wife always made sure there were several in the bathroom, perhaps to invite ruminative attention to the renovations they'd had done there, based on bathrooms she'd seen in just such magazines: the octagonal mirror, the semi-octagonal washbasin and matching bath, and the black-and-white floor-tiles. Of course, the tiling was all wrong. The man who'd laid the tiles had said they should be laid on the diagonal, lozenge-style. It was a small room, the man had pointed out, and diagonal rows increased the sense of floor-space. Also, the walls weren't perfectly square. Laid on the right-angle, the tiles would work out to an irregular cut strip at the end of each row.

But his wife had told him to lay it that way anyway: chessboard-style.

"I think it looks more stylish," she'd said. "For a bathroom" - meaning that was how it had been in the full-page colour photo of the full-size colour bathroom she'd seen in the magazine.

What she didn't even seem to realise, he meditated with a curious futile rancour, was that a really elegant bathroom had to be just that, anyway: a room for taking a bath in. You shouldn't have to perform all your other bodily necessities there as well. The "suite" of matching bath, washbasin and toilet was already, on the grounds of style, space and sanitation, a compromise, another triumph for the petty bourgeois dream that no addition of a matching bidet could disguise. Especially in peach or apricot or avocado, that fruiterer's colour range now irredeemably dated.

Even sharing a bathroom with another person was a compromise, he decided. In fact a fucking affront. Everyone should have their own all-in-one *chambre de toilette*, and on an appropriate

scale, like ones you saw in National Trust properties. The one at Castle Drogo, say, which they'd visited last year in that week they'd spent in Devon, the last castle built in England, designed by Edwin Lutyens for the Drew grocery dynasty. A baronial-size bathroom with a huge bath and rows of copper jugs to fill it with, with an easy-chair to read the newspaper in and a coffee-table, there'd even been a little burn-mark showing where the paterfamilias's morning cigar had once rolled from its ashtray. And the walls panelled in mahogany, with a bank of steps up to an arrow-slit window and a view. Of your own spread-out woods and fields, and a county or two beyond them. Yes. That was where Old Man Drew withdrew. When he wanted peace and a soak. Or a smoke. Or a stroke. Drew of the Home and Colonial.

Along with Scott of the Antarctic
Carleton-Browne of the F.O.
and Barlasch of the Guard.

His eyes were closing. His mind was wavering, burning out.

But he turned his head and looked again at the dressing table in the window-space. From this angle its triple mirrors reflected only inclined planes of ceiling half-lit in the city's ubiquitous, inescapable orange glow. He envisaged himself in the frames, depicted as in a Bacon triptych, a hanging side of pork, the painting done very directly onto board sized with gesso and set in the little metal half-moons which clasped the cheap arched mirrors in place, the three self-portraits hinged like an icon screen, symmetrical inward-facing images of him, in singlet and underpants, unshaven but imposing, a mind to so many, one of the finest of his century, one of the dives on Thirty Second Street, one of the low, dishonest decades, one of these days.

Extract: *Now All The Rage*, by Duncan Bush (Colophon Books, 2008)

You have just read Chapter One of Duncan Bush's new novel *Now All The Rage*.

To read the rest, purchase this book (at £6.99, p. & p. free) by contacting Colophon Fiction: ajwcolophon@live.com