

Snapshots of a life

Depression sometimes overcame George when he thought about the way he had meandered through life: travelling from one impulse to the next and rarely preparing too much ... ***“Nowadays, even my own children and almost every other young person I bump into, seem to forward-plan their lives,”*** he mused. ***“instead of impulse, I could have used a bit more planning too!”***

Mild depression. Nothing up to considering *rehab* or anything like that. Serious contemplation of suicide was out of the question, though on a couple of occasions he had sought out advice from trusted friends and had teased himself and others with thoughts about *planning his exit*: a term he had picked up after attending a number of funerals in Africa, and which he thought was sort of humorous. *“Exit to where?”* he mused, inwardly smiling ... *“Down the pub!?”*

Anyway, it was depression that wasn't too serious, not anything in the realms of life-threatening. His (shall we call it) *down-time* usually lasted for less than twenty-four hours, after a few events had joined forces to knock him off his comfort podium. Feelings of dejection and despair would gradually creep over him, like an all-enveloping and ominous fog drifting in from the sea, usually reaching its zenith as he pulled the bedsheets up over his head, with despondent thoughts and images dueling for space as they ran rings around his brain.

But come the next day's dawn his familiar all-accommodating and stoic self would normally resume transmission in tune with the rays of a new sunny day streaming in through his mesh curtains. A dark and gloomy start to the day of course might warrant a down-mood extension, but seeing that he lived in a hot and - more-often-than-not - sunny part of the world, coupled with the fact the character slump seldom occurred more than two or three times a year, it was quite a safe bet that the morning after the night before would bring back his usual self, ready to meet and greet all-comers and all occasions, head on.

George adored Italy and Italians in Italy; outside Italy, maybe not so much, and their soccer team he had come to view as something below an accepted level of decency and honesty. But those ordinary guys and gals who voted to stay in the place and not take off to some enticing land of opportunity - like Australia - or enlist for the national *Azzurri*, were great ... with their *pregos* and *prontos*, wine at lunchtime and afternoon siestas to follow. He often said to himself

that if God, or whoever was in charge of such things, gave him the freedom to begin his life again, he would ask to be re-born a swarthy and sun-blessed, curly-haired Italian ... in Italia.

As he grew older the Italian siesta idea was one thing he began to adopt on a regular basis, so that whenever and wherever under the afternoon sun, he felt his ageing and increasingly less-mobile frame struggling under the strain, he would retire to bed, lie back, relax and think of days gone by. On those half-waking, half-dozing occasions, his memory unearthed visions in the back of his mind, almost as if there was an extensive vault of files containing photos and videos from days and years gone by; some from earlier times, going back even to when he was a puffy-cheeked toddler, others more recent, but all in turn carried forward to be scanned by his inbuilt mind's eye. A decent proportion of these *viewings* were genuinely formed by his own memory of happenings, whilst others, particularly the earlier sightings, were conceivably supported by items he had seen, or things he had heard from others, after the event. "*That's OK, history is history, built or borrowed,*" he concluded.

Thinking about these, what could only be termed *transmissions of memorabilia*, George recognized that each could be apportioned to chapters of his life, with different visions relating to specific time-zones. Accordingly, the images were presented in formats appropriate to both the event and the era they came from, ranging from a tattered, sepia-coloured photoprint from the 1950s, through to full quality HD video clips, with the latest home-theatre sound, from much more recent times.

And though his life was certainly far from a morbid procession of doom and gloom, George often thought of his existence - and consequently many of the images - being divided into diverse areas of adversity, ranging from love challenges and business debacles through to chronic health issues and near-death experiences. When he first faced the prospect of his own demise by drowning, in his early twenties, this was always presented - and many of the most vivid memories were indeed presented repeatedly, on his in-house brain scanner - as a short colour film, taken at the level of the seawater surface, looking across the waves to a beige coloured beach in the distance (exactly as he remembered it happening). Then, with the sound of indistinct voices coming from the direction of the shore, the video would always pan across the waves to focus on a male swimmer, struggling valiantly to reach him. This of course was a vivid experience that he had remembered in full; he could be sure of that because no family or

friends were present at the site and his gallant and selfless life-saver, after dumping him on the sand and checking his pulse, took off, never to be seen again.

George thought of these séance-like experiences as *snapshots of his life*. At each siesta time he would lay back and close his eyes, ready to conjure up the next image, before viewing and filing according to *time-zone*, plus the state and stage of life it had been plucked from.

Another vision, often repeated, came in the form of an old box-brownie photo, which floated past his eyes, with sepia tones and bedraggled edges. George was front and centre in the picture, smiling in his Sunday best, with dark, hair, parted and combed sideways, holding hands with two slightly younger boys, each sporting a blonde mop of tousled hair. A noticeably stunning woman, arm-in-arm with a tall, fair-haired, rather handsome man, stood immediately behind him. To the sides and rear of these central figures were two or three tiers of men and women, looking like different takes on *Humphrey Bogart* or *Vivien Leigh*, auditioning for the movie *Casablanca*. A family gathering of all ages and from a distinctive period in time, when the boy in the middle of it all was just three years old.

We can recline with George - now towards the opposite end of the age spectrum - as he lies back in typical half-dozing siesta mood, to see which visions of the past his mind might bring forward to today's present. After a few minutes wait, a video rolls past, appearing out of the blue in black and white, more because of the actual circumstances, then design. He had a view of a snow-covered road ...from ground level. He had fallen over, not because of the snow or the ice, though that of course may have added to the problem, but largely due to the fact he was totally drunk. As he struggled to stand, he noticed vomit on his scarf. Fast-forwarded then, to him entering a large house, staggering, but arm in arm with an older youth, to prevent another fall, then ended with a raging-bull father punching his son (George's older friend) in the front hallway of that house. *"Don't you ever try this again you little bastard!"* the father roared. *"This guy is just a kid and see the state he's in. Some friend you are!"* Then with one final haymaker the son slumped to the floor, blood pouring from his nose. Fade to black.

George recognized that these glimpses of the past were not necessarily arranged in chronological succession, or at least did not invade his mind in that sort of sequence. They could occur in a variety of formats and in any of sort of order. For example, the black and white

film mentioned above, and the earlier-described sepia photo of a family gathering, were snatched instances from events many years apart, with George as a toddler in the photo, then a teenager in the film. They showed an enormous contrast between the angel faced kid in the sepia print, compared to the gangly, vomit splattered youth, with an *Elvis* hair do, in the video. It seemed to show that things had veered off-track for the youngster in the intervening period. In fact, the events portrayed were only about twelve years apart, but in terms of substance, the distance between them may as well have been light years!

The *snapshots* that came into view were there because they recalled events which were engraved on his brain cells: tattooed with indelible ink on that grey matter inside his skull. For much of the time in our lives, most of us – in fact if we dissect the truth, probably all of us – do ordinary things. We eat and we sleep, we wash the dishes and we clean our shoes: forgettable events because the same thing happens over and over again. In contrast, the really memorable episode does not repeat itself - or at least, repeats itself very infrequently - and stands out because it says something new; something unfamiliar; something rare.

“*Whose are these?*” The headmaster’s voice boomed out and around the classroom to the engaged throng of five-year-olds. George was re-viewing a short colour video, which included that rare Fassbinder quality of *reification*, whereby the camera zooms in and holds on its subject, for several seconds. The video had to be in colour, because the object being *reified* was his underpants ...with mustard-coloured, shit stains all over them! He thought he had hidden them well enough, behind the pan, in the school’s outdoor toilet block. Now he squirmed – pant-less - in his seat. But there was no capitulation to the stern interrogation session, even though the aroma around the wriggling boy (which could not be seen on the video, though George remembered only too well) tended to give the game away!

Those visions that recurred on many occasions often reflected a variety of near-death experiences. George considered himself to be like a cat with nine lives, whose amazing, death-defying feats were scattered across his continuing presence on Earth. The incidents concerned could be presented one by one, floating through the mind waves at different times ...or stacked together, side by side, like doom-laden toast in a stainless-steel, near-fatalities rack.

In such a way, three short movies, in glorious technicolour, materialized from the depths, and swung into view, intertwined with each-other. With these exhibits, sound - or lack of it, in two of them - was perhaps the most important element.

(Movie No.1) In the first, George's gaze was focused on the pilot of the Piper Cherokee, as he fought valiantly with the control buttons, his plane gliding on a downward trajectory towards the greenish-blue waters of *Spencer's Gulf*, a motionless propeller up front and the only sound being the sound of wind, rushing past the cockpit windscreen. Miraculously, when down to shark spotting level, the engine burst into life and they soared skywards once again.

(Movie No.2) Suddenly, the incredibly loud boom of exploding grenades and gunfire pushed into view, as George could be seen running - as fast as his legs and the objects in his path could allow him, accompanied by other similarly hapless souls - towards the rear of the store, where staff beckoned them to safety. This insider's view of the Al-Shabaab attack on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, was perhaps his most infamous *nine lives* moment, to date.

(Movie No.3) The trilogy ended in silence and dust returning to earth; the upside-down, still-smoking wreck, from which George had just scrambled, at centre stage. He had been travelling in what was termed a *speed-taxi*, through the hills West of the Great Rift Valley. Slowly, into the film came voices talking in other tongues: dark-skinned members of the *Kalingen* tribe surrounded him, tentatively poking and pinching his skin to make sure he was still alive!

These were harrowing moments of a sometimes-fraught life, so George needed to *take-a-breather* and collect his thoughts. There had been an explanation for all this he remembered, from not that long ago, in fact from less than a decade in the past. He searched through the vault of files desperately trying to find the memory that he knew explained it all.

Suddenly it was there: a longer and more recent, colour video. George was seated in an armchair, holding a cup of coffee, opposite a white-haired man; older and wiser than George had been ...or perhaps could ever aspire to become. The man may have been older, but his bright blue eyes burned with the intensity of a much younger person.

"I was watching you yesterday as you walked around these grounds," he began. *"You have an intensity about you: a certain aura, which I find hard to explain. "All I know is that this atmosphere which surrounds you also protects you. It protects your body And your life!"*

George stared back, trying to match the gaze of the older man. He was finding it hard to believe what he had just heard, but still trying to remain calm and composed about it all.

“So you think this aura that you say surrounds me, could in fact be protecting me, and that might explain why I have been plagued by all these narrow scrapes throughout my life, but never actually been dealt the final blow, as it were, by any of them?”

“Yes, I think so,” the man, now appearing to become, more and more, like some Indian guru or person blessed with sage-like gifts. *“The question you have to ask yourself is, why? Why are you blessed with this miraculous protection: this body armour? Where does it come from?”*

With that imposing question hanging in the air, the video receded from view and George was left in contemplative mood yet again, as he had been many times in the past. The video was probably the most frequently re-occurring of all the memories, but it was also the most perplexing: the one most difficult to explain. And that final question still haunted him! If true, where does this protective aura come from?

After a short while thinking about the *mystical aura* video, as he liked to call it, George began to doze again when another dramatic film was presented to the scanner. This time he was behind the wheel of his favourite, jet-black, 16 valve, Ford Fiesta: faster than anything else he had driven on four wheels! It was a serene summer's afternoon in the Cotswolds, and rounding a bend George saw a slow-moving lorry up ahead.

Gauging the distance to the next right-hand bend, he instinctively put his foot to the floor and the car responded with acceleration powers that pushed him back into the driver's chair. Pulling alongside the truck he then saw in the distance another car rounding the next bend, coming towards him at speed. Momentarily he was caught between breaking sharply to hide behind the truck or push the foot down to complete the overtaking operation. In a flash, he chose the latter. Then using all the power the car possessed and his accumulated skills from decades of driving, he whipped the steering wheel, first left, then right, just managing to zig-zag in front of the truck, at high speed, before the oncoming car screamed past, with literally inches to spare. The video faded away with a shot of George, having pulled onto the verge, slumped at the wheel breathing heavily. Never again would he take such a reckless gamble!

But it wasn't all tragedy and trauma: his lifelong treasury held many fond memories - dotted here and there, in terms of both time and place - some touching on the hilarious. At that moment, George feeling in the mood for a bit of hilarity, to cast a sparkle of sunshine on his siesta of the day, smiled inwardly as a once familiar sight of the front bar of a small-town pub in the backblocks of South Australia came into view. The sun was long-gone over the horizon by the time this typically spartan, wooden-floored bar was starting to come to life. A grossly overworked barman struggled valiantly to keep up with the demand for *schooners* of beer, as two or three dozen sun-bronzed men, some wearing the iconic bushman's hat, talked loudly in small groups.

George, leaning on the bar, was part of a group where an argument seemed to be brewing – fueled by the beer - between a farmer friend named Glen and a couple of local shearers. It was noticeable that one of the shearers boasted a veritable forest of black curly hair, which spread out of his grubby white vest, up to his neck and shoulders. Suddenly, there was a bit of a skirmish and Glen whipped a lighter from the bar, lifted the big man's singlet and set fire to the hairy growth. In a flash the flames swept up the man's chest, engulfing his singlet in a serious blaze. The drinkers around the now flaming man all turned towards him in amazement and some – quite wisely – began to fling the beer they were drinking over the guy, in order to douse the flames. After a minute or so of smoke and a lingering smell of burnt hair, the smoldering man, with crispy-brown fragments of singlet hanging from his body and standing in a pool of beer, looked down at his hairless chest in disbelief, then turned to face his adversary, insulted and belittled by what had just happened:

“Well fuck you and your worthless fucking farm Mister Moroney,” he said, red in the face, partly from anger, but also from the hairy-chest inferno that had just occurred; then continued: *“And you can go and fuck your useless fucking sheep too, coz I'm never coming back there to do it for you!!”* With that said, he stormed out of the bar, slamming the door with all his might, leaving the brass doorbell clanging in his wake.