



Snapshot Siesta

Depression sometimes overcame George, when he thought about his meanderings through life: one impulse to the next. Planning? ... What was that?

“Nowadays,” he mused, “Every young person I bump into seems to forward-plan their existence. Why for Christ’s sake didn’t I do the same?”

Mild depression. Nothing up to considering *rehab*; nothing too serious. Contemplation of suicide out of the question. On occasions he teased himself with *planning his exit*, a term he had picked up from African funerals. Kind of amusing:

“Exit to where?” he deliberated - smiling deep inside - *“Down the pub!?”*

Anyway, it was depression; not too serious: nothing in the realm of life-threatening. His (shall we call it) *down-time*, usually lasting less than a day, after events had joined forces to push him off his comfort podium. Feelings of despair would drift in, like an ominous fog from the sea, all-enveloping, reaching its zenith as he pulled the bedsheets up and over; despondent images dueling for space, running rings around his brain.

But come the next day’s dawn - sunrays streaming through white mesh curtains - his familiar all-accommodating stoic self would resume transmission. A gloomy day’s start might warrant a down-mood extension, but considering he lived in a hot and sunny part of the world, and that these character slumps occurred just two or three times a year,

one could bet that by the morning after the night before, his usual sturdy nature would have resumed, to meet-and-greet all-comers head on. Depression? That was for wimps.

Italy was a land George adored, especially the natives who lived there. Outside Italy maybe not so much. And their soccer team was something else: below an accepted level of fair play, which reached the pinnacle of indecency by goading *Zizu* - one of the planet's most respected players - into a vicious head butt! So what if his mother was what *Chiellini* said she was, that was no excuse to introduce the same notion onto the playing field, in a World Cup semi-final, of all places!

Aside from all that, those ordinary citizens who strode the land and voted to stay in the venerated seat of Roman history – those who did *not* take off for some faraway land of opportunity (or enlist for the national *Azzurri*) - did seem the most delightful bunch. He admired their *pregos* and *prontos*, hand-drawn speech and theatrical embellishments.

“If God - or whoever is in charge of such things - can give me license to begin again, please can he arrange my re-birth as a sun-bronzed, curly-haired Italian ... waving his arms about, in Italia?”

Siesta - the concept – outdid almost anything else George learned about from his Italian wanderings. During those all-too-brief stays in the land he cherished, it was noted that after one or two glasses to wash down their lunchtime panini or pasta, the locals had a tendency to dissolve from view: to step back from life's hubbub, for just a short hour or two. Even commerce came to a halt in sympathy. It was hard to imagine such a person-friendly idea creeping into the mindset of his ever-toiling British compatriots.

In consequence, with the passing of time he began to adopt this same siesta notion on a regular basis, so that wherever under the afternoon sun his increasingly less-mobile frame struggled under the strain, he would retire to bed – or any other handy location – then lie back, eyelids closed, to think of days gone by.

Vivid images spiralled into his mind on these half-waking, half-doing occasions; his memory unearthing visions from a cellar of dreams: an extensive vault containing

photos and videos - some harking back to puffy-cheeked toddler days, others more recent - all in turn brought forward, to be scanned by the inbuilt mind's eye.

A decent proportion of these *viewings* were genuinely formed by his own memory of happenings, whilst some, particularly the earlier sightings, were conceivably supported by items he had seen, or which had been described by others after the event.

"That's OK, history is history, built or borrowed," he concluded.

Thinking about these *transmissions of memorabilia*, George recognized each could be apportioned to chapters of his life: visions relating to specific time-zones. Accordingly, images were presented in formats appropriate to both event and era they were drawn from, ranging from tattered black and white photo prints, through to full colour HD video clips with *Dolby* sound, for more recent events. And though his life was certainly far from a morbid procession of doom and gloom, many of the images could be allotted to diverse areas of adversity, represented by love challenges, business debacles, health issues and near-death happenings.

For example, one almost-fatal incident was presented as a short colour film, taken at sea level, looking towards a distant beach, fringed by green-topped sand dunes. George was in a desperate state: close to drowning! This was exactly as remembered: indistinct voices from the shore; video panning across choppy waves to focus on swimmer struggling valiantly to reach him. It was an unforgettable experience, confined to memory: no family or friends present, and gallant lifesaver disappearing after dumping him on the sand. No verbal account of the event and certainly no photographic imagery: purely his own recall.

Another vision from a much earlier time came in the form of an old box-brownie photo: sepia toned, bedraggled edges. George stood centre-front, smiling in his Sunday best: a dark haired three-year-old, flanked by two slightly smaller boys. A noticeably attractive woman, smiling broadly, stood arm-in-arm with a tall fair-haired man, directly behind. Surrounding these central figures were two or three tiers of men and women, looking like different takes on *Humphrey Bogart* or *Ingrid Bergman* auditioning for *Casablanca*. Surprisingly, this photo tops the adversity list, showing the moment when his mother

deserted him, and evolved as his sister. In the reality of today this photo remains with George, serving to underscore the haunting memory of abandonment.

Childhood memories were often presented in still-photo format, but sometimes they arrived as videos, perhaps to explain the recall in more detail.

“Whose are these, may I ask?” The headmaster’s voice boomed out and around the classroom, enthraling the throng of wide-mouthed five-year-olds.

A short colour film was in the view finder. It included that *Fassbinder* quality of *reification*, where camera zooms in to fix on subject. And it had to be in colour, because of the object being *reified*: a pair of underpants, with mustard-coloured, shit stains all over them! George squirmed – pant-less - in his seat, refusing to capitulate to the stern interrogation: a persistent and harrowing recollection from very early schooldays.

In stark contrast, another video rolls by from mid-teens, this time – again due to circumstance - in black and white. There is a view of snow and ice ...from ground level. George has fallen over, not because of the snow or the slippery ice - though that may have added to the problem - but largely as a result of being totally drunk. Struggling to stand, he notices vomit all down his tartan scarf. The scene shifts to him entering a house, half-supported by an older friend, and welcomed in no uncertain manner by the other boy’s enraged father.

“Don’t you ever try this again you little bastard!” the father roars. Then with a final haymaker sends his son to the floor, blood pouring from his nose. Fade to black.

Next comes a single image: the harbinger of a new life. Its occurrence was not long after the preceding film, but it was in total contrast: wonderful colours taken on a blue-sky day. The photo showed four people ascending a steep gangplank, from shore to ship. Leading the group was a lady with dark brown wavy hair, falling to shoulders. This was the woman who had stood behind him, in the tattered sepia photo, when he was a toddler: more mature now but still a striking individual; waving to his camera. Behind her comes two lanky youngsters in colourful T-shirts, with a tall fair-haired man (also from the earlier photo) bringing up the rear. It was ten years on from the days of shitty pants!

A cat with nine lives was how George sometimes considered himself, with amazing death-defying feats littering his tracks. What he thought of as near-death experiences would appear from the vault quite regularly, usually in video format, at times presented one by one, then on other occasions intertwined with others, side by side like doom-laden toast in a stainless-steel, near-fatalities rack.

As example of the multi-video arrangement, three short clips materialized from the depths and swung into view, entwined with each-other; two of them presented in almost total silence, the other to a disturbing background of guns and grenades.

(Video No.1) George's gaze focused on the pilot of the Piper Cherokee fighting feverishly with the controls, his plane gliding towards the greenish-blue Australian waters below, a motionless propeller up front, and only the woosh of air rushing past the cockpit to break the eerie silence. Miraculously, down at shark spotting level, the engine bursts into life, to soar skywards once again.

(Video No.2) The backdrop is an upside-down still-smoking wreck, from which George had just scrambled. He had been travelling in what was termed a 'speed-taxi', through hills west of Africa's Great Rift Valley. Slowly, into the film come voices talking in other tongues, dark-skinned members of the Kalingen tribe, tentatively poking and pinching to make sure he is still alive!

(Video No.3) The trilogy ends, to the crackle and boom of guns and grenades. George is running - as fast as objects in his path can allow him - accompanied by other similarly hapless souls towards the rear of the store, where staff beckon them to safety. This insider's view of the Al-Shabaab attack on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, is perhaps his most infamous nine-lives moment, to date.

George remembered there had been an explanation for all this, from not long ago, in fact from less than a decade in the past. He searched through the vault at the back of his brain, desperately trying to find the file which he knew explained all.

The mystical aura video. Suddenly it was there: more recent and in full colour. He was seated in an armchair, holding a coffee cup, opposite a white-haired man, a

little older and perhaps a degree wiser than George could claim to be. The man's bright blue eyes burned with the intensity of a much younger person.

"I was watching you yesterday young man, as you walked around the grounds," he began. *"You have an intensity: an aura which I find hard to explain. This aura surrounds you; it protects you: your body ... and your life! The questions you need to ask yourself is where does it come from? ... And how long will it stay?"*

Towards the end of this insightful pronouncement, George is seen staring at the older man, striving to remain calm and composed. This video he found perplexing and difficult to explain. Those final questions continued to haunt him ... and challenge his beliefs.

With age the siestas became more frequent, but George often noticed the memories harked back to earlier days, rather than more recent times. So while glimpses of a sometimes-torrid childhood In England, or coming to grips with Australian life were common, he was less likely to strike material reflecting his current life in Africa. Secretly, he hoped this was not a discrete indicator of onrushing Alzheimer's.

George also recognized that in very real terms, he had himself created many of the items now stored in his personal vault. 35mm film changed to digital, and Super8 video to camcorder, but regardless of the technology, he himself had created the markers which recorded the memorable moments, decade after decade. Locations were scattered across four continents, with only the extraordinary passing muster for storage and safe keeping ... never the mundane.

These unique incidents extruded from thousands, possessed elements that set them apart. The connected images of a naked, eight-year-old daughter, standing on a cracked ceramic basin at bath-time, before crashing to the floor with blood pouring from her wrist, was half-imagined (because he was away from the scene for that precious moment of disaster). Thus, imagination too, he realized - coupled with guilt in this case – sometimes played a vital role in presentation, as well as a vivid role in interpretation.

At times, his rewarding work over the years with young people, shone through like a beacon of hope, in what seemed to be an ever-darkening world. In group format it could

be an exhibit of 4,000 girls, dressed in the vibrant colours of their culture, standing to sing the national anthem in rural India, or in singular form, hearing *Tracy*, a brilliant 11-year-old orator from a village school in Kenya, speaking about climate change to ten thousand school heads. "*Which private school does she come from?*" they all asked.

George was often amazed by the juxta positioning of these pictorial memories; at first sight it seemed incongruous to present scratchy video recall of a car ride to Scarborough as a two-year old, alongside his daughter dancing around a fire on Juhu Beach, Mumbai, to celebrate Ganesh Chaturthi some 50 years later. But maybe there was a hidden reason to this pairing: a coherent madness, to add spark to his never-ending *Siesta of Dreams*.

"*One day,*" George thought to himself, "*I'm sure it will all become crystal clear,*" then rising to make a cup of afternoon tea, "*As clear as mud, most likely!*"

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