

Ghost Writing

This is Day 29. The traditional months and seasons have no meaning anymore. We all live – or not – from one day to the next, each day a repetition of the previous one. Like in that Groundhog film – but much worse, because we don't learn from our mistakes, we just sink further into regret and despair. Or at least I do. Even the BBC – the only station still broadcasting – has largely given up on news bulletins, now that they finally accept that we have realised how we've been lied to.

I first met Lisa in the Botanical Gardens, back in what used to be June. The day was chill, grey and frightening, like all the days in all the months since the Zap. The Gardens were never very popular, situated at the unfashionable Western end of the Royal Victoria Park. Nowadays they are deserted. The idea of 'getting a breath of fresh air' is a sick joke; people cower in their dwellings, only scuttling down to their designated supermarket to collect their weekly rations on their appointed day. But I refuse to be cowed, and that's how I met Lisa.

She was hiding from the acid rain in the Aquae Sulis Temple, a pseudo-Grecian edifice created for the 1851 Great Exhibition, more recently converted into an 'environmental resources centre', now of course abandoned. I knew better than to approach her. I forced a smile, offered my hand, smiled again when she ignored it. She was scared. Fear is the default state, since the Zap, for all of us, man and beast. I walked away. But I couldn't forget her. Those large eyes pleading yet denying my approach. That, for me, was Day 1.

Day 42. Thursday, according to the calendar. Ration day. I lugged the bags of groceries up the hill, past the vandalised and contaminated Audis and Teslas, and then up the still-honey-coloured Bath stone steps to our house in Widcombe Terrace. Key in the door, then took each bag in turn, stepping over the pair of thick black plastic body bags – Government issue – cluttering up the hall, down the stairs to the kitchen. Jane was at the French windows, her back to me, staring at the rain which was now sheeting down onto what used to be the lawn. She had heard me but didn't turn round.

Day 45. I suppose Jane is right: I'm crazy to be risking my life going out to the park every other day, totally unnecessarily. But she doesn't know about Lisa, who has started to rely on me for food. To trust me. And anyway: Gerald at no. 13 used to stay indoors with the windows closed all the time, sent Marjorie out to collect their rations – but he still got radiation sickness: the fever, the delirium, the skin lesions, a short but horrible death. Poor Gerald. I don't venture into the city, just the park. Though not when there's an East wind blowing, of course. There are hardly any aggressive beggars these days, they realise no-one has anything to give. And one advantage of a rural location: a lot of people kept shotguns at home, which helps the Neighbourhood Watch maintain a semblance of order. Not like in London, where Joe lives.

Day 57. When I told Jane about Lisa, and that I wanted to bring her to live with us, she exploded. As I knew she would. The city is full of desperate homeless people, why should we look after this Lisa? We owe her nothing. Just another mouth to feed, from our meagre rations. And what diseases would she bring? I didn't tell Jane about the scraps I'd been saving, taking down to the park for Lisa. I finally had someone I could talk to, someone who appreciated me. I think I'm falling in love with Lisa.

Day 69. I had made an arrangement with George, our neighbour in Widcombe Terrace. First we dug a six-foot trench in his back lawn, then another one in my vegetable patch. There is no point in trying to grow vegetables, anyway; they only absorb and concentrate the acid from the soil. We call it acid, but it isn't. The plan is, whichever one of us dies first, the other will bury him in his trench. Neither of us can bear the thought of the body bag: put out on the pavement with the rubbish, thrown into the truck and taken God knows where, to be disposed of God knows how. The BBC tells us that this isn't a time for sentimentality, the country is in dire straits, we must face facts and make the best of etc etc etc. I'm tempted to chuck out the radio, but then we couldn't hear the daily repeats of The Goon Show and The Archers.

Day 75. Lisa is here with us. She sleeps in the shed at the bottom of the garden, until I can persuade Jane to accept her into the house. Liz came on the radio today, giving the nation a pep talk about how we had stood up for our principles, for spreading democracy and freedom throughout the world, whatever the cost. We could be proud of ourselves. We had not succumbed to appeasement. Churchill would be proud of us. I went to the bathroom to throw up; at least the water and sewerage still function occasionally.

Day 81. Yesterday evening something strange happened: the telephone rang. Landlines had gone down after the Zap, along with the internet, mobile networks and terrestrial television. Satellite TV lasted a few more days, until the War Cabinet ordered all non-governmental broadcasters to close.

"Hello? Can you hear me?"

I picked it up gingerly, as if the Sickness might be transmitted through the fibre, from wherever. "Yes. Who is that?"

"It's me: Joe. Your son, Joe. Is that you, Dad?"

"Yes. Where are you?"

"Still in Bermondsey, at home. Me, Emma, the kids – we're still alive. We still have lockdown; no-one can travel outside London."

"I know. Apparently the Army patrols round the M25 have orders to shoot to kill. I suppose it gives them something to do."

"It's necessary, to prevent the emergency services, the rationing system being overwhelmed. It's all part of the National Recovery Project."

"Recovery? What recovery?"

"Didn't you hear the PM's broadcast? The War Cabinet are working incredibly hard to get the nation back up and running after this setback. You see, some phone lines are already getting reconnected. And here in Bermondsey Tesco has begun ration deliveries. They cost an arm and a leg, but it means we don't need to go outside to collect..."

"TISWAS"

“What? Oh yes, very clever. It’s easy to sit on the sidelines and criticise, but we all have to pull together, get behind the Government, and before long we’ll be back on our feet and able to retaliate – like Liz said.”

“TISWAS”

“Look, I’d be more careful if I were you, Dad. I expect these lines are being monitored; it’s important to prevent the spread of despondency and misinformation. If you keep saying that word we could be cut off, and you might get a visit from the police.”

“Police? I haven’t seen a policeman since the Zap.”

“Police officer, Dad. That’s an outmoded word. They can seize your assets, under the Anti-Terrorism Act.”

“Oh, for God’s sake! And assets? What assets? No-one has any assets anymore. TISWAS. Thanks for phoning, but...”

“No, don’t hang up. How are you both? Look, I need some help. You do have money – your pension is still being credited to your bank account. We don’t have any jobs, any income. And as part of the National Recovery Project there’s a pharmacy in Westminster which has reopened, and they have some supplies of iodine tablets. Against the radi... the Sickness. They cost a fortune, though. We really need them – not for us, for the kids. Can you give me the money? You wouldn’t be able to get them for yourselves, anyway – they’re only for the under-60s. You can transfer...”

“TISWAS. There are no banks here; they closed down years ago. And no internet. It’s every man for himself nowadays. Or for themselves, you would say.

“Good luck, Joe. Say hi to Emma and the kids from us.” And I put the phone down.

What a nerve! It’s people like Joe who brought this on us. He calls himself a journalist – or what passed for journalism in those debased times. Not reporting actual news. He used to write opinion columns in the Telegraph and the Guardian. Or rather, to ghost-write for ‘resident experts’ who were too busy to do it themselves. For the Telegraph he was an ex-NATO General, who each week demanded the supply of ever-more-devastating weaponry and ever-more-blatant UK involvement in Ukraine, to see Russia defeated once and for all. In the Guardian he was a former Archbishop, who preached Hope Not Hate: in a world without borders we must all fight for universal human rights and social justice. To defend the world’s oppressed minorities – the correct ones, not those pesky Yazidi or Baha’i or Christians – because their suffering is our suffering, their struggle is also ours.

And where did it get us? First there was the Ukraine Zap: the explosion of that nuclear power station, which the IAEA had warned about for years. Deliberate or accidental? By the Russians, the Ukrainians, Iran, the US – by us, even? We still don’t know, and are not allowed to ask. NATO’s response was to launch its own bombers. Then, five days later, the UK was Zapped. Sizewell-B, on the East Anglian marshes, hit by a Russian ICBM. As they had been threatening for months, threats repeatedly dismissed as ludicrous, impotent bluster by the ex-General and the former Archbishop.

I recall Lord David declaring to a meeting of NATO foreign ministers that “This is the struggle of our generation. If we get behind Ukraine in their fight this is the way ultimately to bring this to an end.” Well, he was correct there. He spoke just before the Zap. Which ended the war – and ended Ukraine. And, when the wind blew from the East, ended the countries behind. And, with the second Zap on Sizewell, ended the UK too.

I imagine that, were there still any newspapers, the ex-General would have told us how Putin had made a fatal miscalculation, while the former Bishop would console us that 'God works in mysterious ways'.

Then came the dirty bomb in London. By one of those oppressed minorities whose struggle is our struggle but whose values were not ours, taking advantage of the chaos.

It was all so inevitable, so many warnings, no need for hindsight. Even the Doomsday Clock predicted it. But our onanistic Alice-in-Wonderland government, which always pontificated about its grave (ironic term) responsibilities for national defence and homeland security, had made no arrangements to protect the civilian population. AS we always knew, if we'd stopped to think. No radiation shelters, no PPE, no gas masks, no iodine tablets, no emergency hospitals, no three-minute warning, no civil defence, no contingency plans. Except for themselves. That's how TISWAS started. A few days after our Zap, when the BBC resumed broadcasting, we discovered that the War Cabinet – Dame Liz, Sir Boris, Lord David and their mutually-ennobled chums, with their families – were already ensconced in a self-sufficient Government Control Centre built in secret on Foula. Hence TISWAS: the innocent name of a subversive 1970s children's TV programme now used as code for the subversive slogan: 'They're In Shetland, We Are in Shitland'.

To be continued