

Extracts from Ian Breakwell's last diary

1.5.2004

For when people wish to engage me in conversation I've taken to carrying in my back pocket a piece of card on which is written in felt pen: "I have laryngitis and cannot speak properly. Sorry." Most people acknowledge it sympathetically, but sometimes it causes consternation. A woman at Kings Cross station thought I was begging. A flash of panic passed across the bank cashier's face until she read what she had probably assumed was a hold-up note. And today the taxi driver read it with tight-lipped suspicion, then nervously glanced at the rectangular container I was carrying covered with a blanket, which I obligingly peeled back to reveal the inscrutable face of my cat, stoically sitting in her carrying case en route to the vet.

23.7.2004

London: St Barts Hospital Voice Clinic

I'm sitting alongside the consultant, watching a videotape of my voice-box in pulsing pink colour. The soundtrack is my voice feebly gasping "ha," "ha." I'm supposed to say "hee," "hee," but I can't while my tongue is being gripped. The consultant says "Now this is interesting, see how the right vocal cord is functioning, moving back and forth as you speak, but the left vocal cord is immobile." "Why is that?" "Because the nerve to the cord is trapped. By a curious anatomical anomaly the nerve to the left vocal cord, in all human beings, is one of the longest in the body, going right down the neck and thorax into the chest and abdomen. And the longer the tube the more vulnerable it is, which is why transatlantic telephone cables were replaced by satellites." "And

where is this nerve trapped?" "In the upper part of the chest." "How is it trapped?" "By something pressing against it, probably a tumour. The CT scan shows a shadow."

Flashback to the Royal Festival Hall, sometime in the 1970s and the only seat I've managed to get for the sell-out Ray Charles concert is in the back row behind the orchestra, so I'm looking out at the auditorium filled with middle-aged couples and rows of handbags on knees. Ray's at the peak of his easy listening popularity after a string of million-selling interpretations of country and western ballads with lush strings. He runs seamlessly through the whole repertoire, and even throws in a medley of Paul McCartney compositions, which I'm thinking "these I can do without." Then, midway through *Yesterday* he suddenly hits the line "There's a shadow hanging over me" with such perfect intonation and anguished soul that the hairs stand up on the back of my neck.

"The shadow knows, huh?" "Well, we don't know exactly" (he doesn't get the reference, it's a Coasters song) "but I'm referring you immediately to the London Chest Hospital." "Lung cancer?" "Could be."

September 2004

So, having carved open my back, bust through my ribs into my chest and dug out some biopsy samples, the consultant says it's a squamous tumour. Previously a rare malignancy, the squamous became famous during the 20th Century as the most common cancer associated with cigarette smoking. So, it looks like the ciggies did it and now it's payback time. Now I look back over my life as a smoker and consider whether it was worth it. Starting with my father's discarded dog ends, I progressed as a schoolboy and art student to sampling all brands of ready-made cigarettes,

each one a taste experiment with its own designed packet to be savoured and often saved. The entwined tendrils of vegetation curled across the paper packet of Wild Woodbine like an engraving by William Blake. Sweet Afton's apricot and white pack had a line engraving of a trout stream and a verse from a Robert Burns poem. The sturdy cardboard box with the hinged lid which contained Passing Clouds had a front cover tap room scene of cavaliers contemplatively exhaling from long clay pipes. Capstan Full Strength, the strongest English cigarette, brooked no nonsense: thick rope hawser was wrapped tight round an iron capstan like a python around the throat.

Others, like De Maurier and De Reske evoked ocean liners or the bars of foreign embassies, while Sobranie Black Russians were pure exoticism, and Sobranie Cocktail were like toy sticks, each one a different colour: pink, green, red, yellow, with a band of gold paper where a filter might be, they were cigarettes to be looked at, held against the light, smoked only as an afterthought. Even Park Drive, my Dad's staple fag, had elegant curlicued calligraphic red lettering on a plain white ground. When he was in isolation in the TB sanatorium he chain smoked them, to the horror of my mother, but the matron said "leave him, it's his only pleasure." Then he began to give Mum the money for other brands: Senior Service, Players Weights, Gold Star, and unwittingly she was supplying the whole ward because the other wives had refused.

My great friend, the artist and writer Tony Earnshaw, also smoked Park Drive continuously for fifty years, then quit. And like many others who cold turkey lifelong addictions he developed substitute cravings: with some it's chocolate, cakes, Trebor Mints, but in Tony's case it was cream crackers, and old habits die hard. He would go into his corner shop in the morning and ask for "The Daily Mirror and forty Jacobs please."

One after the other I sampled the brands: Players Navy Cut, Churchmans No 1, Strand, Bachelors, Kensitas, Black Cat, Craven A, Pall Mall, Camel, Gitanes, Boyards, Gauloises, and the disgusting herbal cigarettes, such as Honeysuckle, which smelled and tasted like bonfires of grass cuttings. But then I settled, for forty years, into smoking properly: Golden Virginia ritualistically hand rolled, the tobacco strands teased into even consistency along the Rizla Blue paper, deftly turned and licked into perfect shape, the ends poked in with a Swan Vestas match, then lit and inhaled while replacing the lid on the elegant yellow and gold tobacco tin. Apart from at times of disaster or great stress, my smoking was never compulsive. I never chain smoked. Each cigarette was a pause in life's flow, an event, a considered moment. Approximately 164,250 such moments during my smoking life.

From an early age it was inculcated in me, as a principle of life, never to give up. After my diagnosis I decided to apply this principle of never giving up to smoking.

The first step is to go into hospital for general anaesthetic surgery. During recovery from this you are confined to bed on ward for several days, unable to smoke, but the withdrawal symptoms are masked by regular doses of first morphine, then codeine. During this time, which is also without alcohol, you monitor when the nicotine craving is strongest; in my case around 11am: coffee break.

Convalescing back at home, the trick is then to wake up in the morning with the firm intention of smoking, at a designated hour beyond the time of maximum craving; my personal choice being 10pm, in the pub with a pint. Then, safe in the knowledge that a nicotine fix is on the far horizon but getting closer with every

passing minute, you forego daytime smoking and thus remove the daily habit. Then you get on with your day's work.

At 10pm you go, without fail, to the pub, take a satisfying draught of the pint, then slowly and ritualistically hand roll a very large cigarette, pause with keen anticipation, light, then deeply inhale. It hits like the first cigarette you ever smoked. Your head spins, eyes blur, sweat breaks out on your forehead. It is the equivalent of thirty thoughtlessly smoked daytime cigarettes.

Afterwards you go to bed, and the next day you follow exactly the same routine. This is how to not give up.

15.12.2004

London: in the pub.

Charlie Wilkins was a desert rat. Khaki shorts and khaki hat. But he didn't wear his hat when, in between fighting Rommel, he and his fellow squaddies lay out in the sun to get a tan, in the middle of the Sahara desert without any suncream. The result was that Charlie and his pals all got skin cancer, in Charlie's case full-blown melanoma. So the army doc lathered the top of Charlie's head with corrosive cream then, when it dried, burnt it off, together with the suppurating skin beneath, with a blow torch. Scalped him. Crude, but obviously effective, because here he is, a chipper 92, chatting amiably to me in the flat cap he's worn every day since he was demobbed. "Nasty thing, cancer" says Charlie, "I wouldn't like to have it again."

Apart from the Sahara, Charlie has lived the whole of his life within half a mile of this pub. He points out changes to the pub interior during that time: the bar which used to be over there, the

partition now gone, the positioning of the tables. And I wonder if anything significant has happened in Charlie's life since 1944.

"So what do you do now, Charlie?" "Nothing." "And do you reckon you'll make it to a ton?" "I don't see why not."

Now I wish Charlie good health, but I'd venture to suggest that I might have made more creative use of the thirty extra years he has on me, given the chance. When the diagnosis was a squamous tumour then I could accept the logic of fifty years smoking inevitably leading to lung cancer. But when the second biopsy opinion suggested an adenocarcinoma which is not at all related to cigarettes but quite common among non-smoking, vegetarian young women in America, then the clear inference is that life is a lottery and that most clichéd of thoughts does cross my mind: "Why me?"

Yet there is no point in thinking of unfairness. Things are as they are.

Yes, there is sadness, and regret; not over what could or should have been in the past, but for what might have been in the future. There were still works to create, still fish to catch, still time to spend with Felicity. I have had the three score, the ten would have been a bonus. But then everything is relative: I've had twice as long as Schubert, twenty years more than Kafka, and forty more than Charlie Christian.

April 2005

It is now approaching the first anniversary of when my voice suddenly disappeared, and then three months later the final

diagnosis, since when my life has divided into BC (Before Cancer) and AD (After Diagnosis).

BC, fading eyesight, toothlessness, arthritis, even osteoporosis, were all accepted as the inevitable consequences of growing old. None were life threatening. Despite the awareness of mortality permeating not just the *Dance of Death* series, but all my work in all media these past ten years, continuing daily life was to a surprising degree still taken for granted. No death sentence had yet been pronounced: that came with the diagnosis.

AD, though prognosis is unpredictable, the time scale of the future is suddenly short term instead of long. Every minute of the day is lived in the knowledge that I am terminally ill. I close my eyes to sleep and the word CANCER is a flashing neon sign on the inside of the eyelids. And when I wake in the morning the first word in my mind is CANCER, and there it stays all day, in every breath, every mouthful of food and sip of drink, a subtext to every spoken word. Like Blake's invisible worm the word permeates the cells of the mind as rapidly as the tumour cells invade the body. There is no forgetfulness even for a moment. It is ever present, the touchstone of each waking minute. Forthcoming death is no longer a creative theme, a concept, but an imminent physical reality.

My stoical acceptance of this reality is considered by others to be unflinchingly brave, but I wonder if the most radical response to diagnosis would be irrational denial of it, a flat refusal to believe? "Cancer? Are you kidding? Forget it. I'm outta here." Perhaps there are people who can do this, but I can't

I can however transcend the rational creatively. I made a series of thirteen drawings in late summer 2004, during the two weeks after

my final diagnosis. Shock, and feverish consideration of the implications meant that I could not sleep, and I made a drawing each night, sometimes in the hours of darkness, sometimes at dawn, in a physical state of fatigued insomnia and slight hallucination. The flower-like drawings are images of organic growth and blooming. On the fourteenth night my normal sleep pattern returned and the series ended.

It seems that as the Grim Reaper taps on one shoulder, the Muse taps on the other, and initially there is a feverish burst of creative energy. The feeling is that every moment is precious and must be seized. Adrenalin courses through the veins. Paintings, drawings, collages and writings pour forth. But then the side effects of the chemotherapy begin to kick in and everything slows down. Lethargy creeps into the bones and I realise that I've been sitting in a chair for forty minutes staring at my shoe. At times the lethargy worsens into incapacitating fatigue.

With bent knees I move like a sleep walker, in slow motion, a wraith-like shadow of my former self. As if under water in an old fashioned diving suit with lead boots. Behind the brass and glass visor of my globular helmet my tongue sticks out from between my lips, a side-effect of the anti-sickness pills, so that I look like some stupefied retard plodding along the ocean bed.

As bodily movement becomes snail-like and mental processes become dulled, so time slows down too. Far from every moment seeming precious, each now seems interminable. Time drags at snail pace. I stare at the second hand going round on my watch.

And all day the nausea and the sour taste in the sore and blistered mouth. Eventually the knowledge that I am going to spend the day feeling sick and tired lessens the incentive to get out of bed in the

morning. I arise later and later to shorten the day. Eventually the most dangerous of all mental states begins to settle on me: boredom.

Most people, as far as I can see, are bored, no matter how busy they appear to be. Bored enough for the whole gamut from texting messages to derailing trains to Armageddon.

Well, I've never been bored in my life and I don't intend to start now. Boredom, as I explained to the uncomprehending consultant, is my bottom line. The jumping off point if I was back at Beachy Head.

When consultants and nurses, assessing the merits of chemotherapy against the side effects, refer to the 'quality of life', they are not necessarily referencing the same criteria of quality control as me. The louche, debonair film actor George Sanders' suicide note said: "I just got bored," which many people thought grossly casual and irresponsible, but I can empathise with it entirely.

When I wake I lie and think of what George Brecht once said to me, that nothing is necessarily gained by getting out of bed. So I decide that if I can spontaneously name fifty things worth getting up for, then I will. Here goes:

Blue sky with vapour trail turned golden by the setting sun.
Backlit spider's web on the kitchen window.
Belisha beacon at midnight on the empty street.
Lionel Hampton solo on *Stardust*.
Freshly poured pint of Guinness settling on the bar.
White butterfly on purple buddleia.
Cat purring against my ear, her breath on my neck.

Cat stretched full length in sunbeam.
A soft poached egg on soda bread toast.
Clifford Brown's solo on Sarah Vaughan's *September Song*.
Memory of the first time I saw Felicity laugh.
Bessie Smith's "Yeaaaahh!"
Sandpiper running the edge of the surf.
A million stars in the Milky Way.
Pitch darkness. Car headlights over the brow of the hill briefly
illuminate a pine tree in a descending curtain of light. Then pitch
darkness again.
Sparrow hawk hovering.
Sea trout leaps.
Cormorant dives.
Two on off stump which turn past the bat, and then the arm ball.
And only five seasons ago. Now I couldn't bowl an over.
Her hand in mine.
Cat lapping milk.
Pink sunset.
Sea otter at dusk.
Fuchsia in bloom.
Sunset on the cricket field after the last match of the season. Mist
drifting in.
Earl Grey Oolong.
Thousands of migratory birds whirling in the sky above the
estuary, one moment a dark mass, the next instant invisible in the
reflected light.
First cast of the fishing season.
Cooling sweat after making love.
Flash fried calves liver and green salad.
Moules marinière.
Monkfish stew.
Back dimples.
Misterioso.
Grey mullet swirl in the estuary shallows.

A hand rolled Golden Virginia cigarette.
A deep hot bath.
Gin and tonic.
Hot whiskey, lemon, cloves and honey.
A Gaggia brewed espresso.
Marstons Pedigree.
Blackbird duet.
Dawn chorus.
Full moon over the sea.
Salt beef on rye with mustard and dill pickle.
A dry martini.
Late cut past gully.
Lapsang Souchong.
Apple blossom.
My studio in the morning light.

So, that's fifty and I throw back the covers, swing my legs out of
the bed and stand up. Hundreds of shooting pinpoints of light
flash in front of my eyes, acidic bile rises up from my stomach into
my gullet, and a wave of nausea brings me back to a sitting
position on the bed, swallowing gulps of air. And then another
day, such as it is, begins.

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