

Conversation Piece

“Ere y’are then mate, a pint o’ best in an ‘andle. Cheers mate.”

“Why’re you talking like that?”

“Oh sorry, just imitating the locals. Janice thinks it’s funny.”

“Well Cheers. Later tonight, aren’t we? Got parky, hasn’t it. Nice and warm in here though. Isn’t it lovely to see a log fire? Over there in the alcove do?”

“Yea, fine. So what have you been up to this week?”

“Hang on, have you ordered?”

“Of course, the usual. Brie this week, no bacon. Right?”

“Right. Thanks. Cheers. Well not a lot to report really; potted in the garden, dead-heading and raking leaves. Not a lot you can do this time o’ year. Took Gladys shopping for a new winter coat. Waited in for the plumber to come yesterday, and stop the trickle in the loo, but he didn’t turn up.”

“No surprise there then. God, don’t we waste a lot of time waiting around for other people. If *we’d* acted like that at work, we wouldn’t have lasted long. Anyway, I’ve been reading a lot, ‘cos I had this cold and didn’t go out for ages.”

“Oh sorry to hear that. OK now though? What are you reading.”

“The Bell Jar, by Sylvia Plath.”

“Ah, that’s her semi-biographical about her mental illness isn’t it?”

“That’s right. Very perceptive. Course later she committed suicide, she was only thirty. A lot of celebrities commit suicide; depressives, or burnt out I suppose. Composers, poets, comedians.”

“Funny isn’t it, I always think of stuffed animals in a glass dome when I think of a bell jar. I suppose that’s the analogy she was making in the book; being hemmed in and examined by those on the outside.”

“Never thought of that. They always remind me of the school chemistry lab. I can see it now, but I can’t remember what it was used for. They were thicker with a glass knob on top weren’t they?”

“Were they? I don’t know.”

“She was married to the poet laureate Ted Hughes wasn’t she? I remember years before he was so well known, before he married, he came to our school, and gave a reading of some of his poetry to the sixth form. Quite an impressive guy.”

“Have you read any since?”

“No, don’t read poetry, don’t understand it, unless it rhymes. You know, like Rupert Bear or Limericks.”

“Like, ‘There was a young fellow in Crewe, who found a dead mouse in his stew. Said the waiter, ‘Don’t shout and wave it about, or the rest’ll be wanting one too.’”

“That’s good. I know one but it’s too rude for polite conversation. Poetry. A bit like Shakespeare really, ruined for me at school, pullin’ apart every sentence; lost the plot. There was a guy from the RSC on radio three the other day, saying Shakespeare should we watched, not read. Every kid should be taken to a play. Let it wash over you. You don’t have to

understand every word or sentence. I think he's right. Perhaps you should read poetry like that."

"Who was it said, 'education is what you remember when you've forgotten everything you were taught at school'? A lot of it was a waste of time. I remember our chemistry master, a dodderly old buffer, well past it, all he ever did was write stuff on the blackboard and we had to copy it down into our books. Waste of time, he could have given us a Xerox sheet with it all on. Anyway, we gave him a pretty hard time. Someone would say something like, 'George, this is your conscience speaking,' and he would swing round from the board to see who it was, but everyone was heads down writing; he never did find out who it was."

"Do you think he knew it was a kid, or did he think it really was his conscience speaking?"

"Oh come on, he may have been dodderly and past it, but he couldn't be that gaga, could he? He'd have been sacked long ago."

"Oh I don't know, we had an English teacher, I mean he taught English, could've been Welsh or Canadian for all I know. Anyway, he wasn't that old, but he used to walk around the school grounds at night, playing his violin. Now that's odd, isn't it?"

"Well it's certainly eccentric, but not nutty. I remember a guy telling me something that happened to him once. Now he was ex-army, down to earth, know what I mean? He was driving along a straight country road at night, nothing about, and suddenly a cyclist came from nowhere right out in front of him. He slammed on the brakes, swerved, but couldn't miss her. He felt the bump, bump, as he ran over her, and he knew he must have killed her. He stopped and jumped out shaking, but there was no-one there. He was trying to rationalise what had happened; a moment's loss of consciousness, a distraction, whatever. Anyway, while he was standing in the road, a car came from the opposite direction. Just as it passed him, it too swerved just as he had done. It stopped, and the guy got out muttering things about, 'must have killed her, couldn't avoid her, it was her fault'. Exactly the same thing had happened to him. True story. They found out later, a woman on a bicycle had been killed on that road at that very spot years ago. Makes you wonder."

"The Society for Psychical Research is full of examples like that. Tormented souls that can't rest. Doomed to wander the world for ever. Haunted houses. Poltergeists. Ghosts. Things that go bump in the night. Spirits that trouble people. Do *you* believe all that?"

"Well it's hard to poo poo it completely. After all, all religions are based on the supernatural. The Greek and Roman gods, the pagan worship of Earth and sun and stars, the Jewish and Christian God, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and so on."

"Ah, food at last. Thank you Janice."

"Can I get you boys anything else? No? Enjoy."

"Boys eh? When I was little, my daddy used to wake me up every morning with, 'Up time little man.' Now I'm a man, I'm being called a boy."

"And what's happening to the English language. It's being hijacked by the Americans. Everyone talks about *research* now, when the word is *research*. And *harass* instead of *harass*. And why do we have to listen to this banal screeching so called music? Janice, could you turn the music down a bit please. Thanks love. Perhaps we should bring in a CD of Schubert's quintets or something, see how that goes down. Anyway, this looks good. Crispy."

“I was thinking. When *I* was a small boy, my parents took me to see a scary film once, called *The Beast with Five Fingers*. I can’t remember too much about the beginning, but a guy loses a hand somehow and dies, and he’s put in the family mausoleum. One night the lights go on in there. When they go to investigate, the hand is missing, but there are hand prints along the wall. It starts to terrify everyone in the house. It plays the piano in the night, all on its own. I had dreadful nightmares after that.”

“My dad played the piano. I can remember he sat me down beside him on the piano stool once and played Rachmaninov’s C sharp minor prelude. While he was playing it, he told me it was a story about a man being buried alive. I know what you mean about the nightmares.”

“My mum used to put a lighted night-light in a saucer of water by my bed. Did yours?”

“I don’t remember, but when did night-lights start being called tea-lights, and why? What have they got to do with tea? Night, I understood.”

“Depends what they’re used for. They were called tea-lights when they were used under a teapot to keep it warm.”

“There are a lot of pieces of piano music written for one hand you know. A lot of them were commissioned by a guy called Wittgenstein, ‘cos he only had a left hand. Ravel’s concerto is probably the most famous.”

“If you were right handed and you lost it, I wonder how long it would take you to master everything with just the left. I mean writing would be a serious challenge wouldn’t it?”

“We do take everything for granted don’t we. Could you have your car adapted, to drive with one hand? Would DVLA allow it? What about losing a leg? It’s amazing what you see they can do for injured service personnel nowadays, you know prostheses, and plastic surgery and face reconstruction so on. Just look at the Paralympics. It’s amazing.”

“Yea. Thinking about taking things for granted. We had a power cut last week. Fortunately, it didn’t last long, but it was during the evening, and it was dark. So we lit tea-lights or were they night-lights? But then you realise all the things which are dependent on electricity; the ‘phone, the tele., the oven, the fridge, the washing machine and dishwasher ... Then everything had to be reset, the alarm clock, the timer on the cooker, the central heating... It was the same when the car packed up; changes your whole life style. Everything’s great when it’s working.”

“Did you learn a musical instrument at school?”

“Not at school. I had private piano lessons for a short time, but I hated the practising and soon gave up. I always fancied one of those old-fashioned pianolas. You know, you put a roll in, and pump it with your feet. Bit like a barrel organ at the fair. I saw one once in a shopping mall in Denver. It was a modern one, a baby grand, that you just plugged in and it played itself.”

“What’s the point of that? Just put on a CD. Anyway, who’s got space enough for a grand piano in a modern house?”

“Good point. It’s all about nostalgia, I suppose. Look how many antiques programmes there are on tele. All that stuff that people have no more time for. Others see it and say, ‘I used to have one of those. See how much its worth now, should ‘ave kept it.’”

“Yeh, people talk about the ‘good old days’. I bet there never were any ‘good old days’. People say, ‘If I had my time over again’, ‘well you can’t, so don’t go there’, I always say. ‘Look forward, not back.’”

“Like the pianola. There’s an annoying trend for playing music on period instruments, ’cos that’s what Bach or Beethoven would have composed for. But I bet they’d like to have heard their music played on modern instruments.”

“Particularly Beethoven, he went deaf in later life didn’t he?”

“Did you know that only 30% of children now learn a musical instrument? And that’s half the number of their parents’ generation.”

“Well, it’s not surprising is it? They’re all watching tele. or playing games on their iPads, or tapping in to social media. Suppose it’s a generational thing, but I don’t get it. It’s so banal, ‘guess what I had for lunch today’, ‘going shopping this afternoon’...

“But don’t you think every generation reacts the same? When the wireless first came out, people sat huddled round it listening to the news, dance bands, Worker’s Playtime and Children’s Hour, instead of what their parents had done, standing round the piano playing and singing. Anyway, apparently kids are watching less and less television nowadays.”

“‘Cos they’re on their electronic gadgets. No wonder kids are getting obese earlier and earlier, they don’t go out to play anymore. We were always out, from first thing till dark.”

“Yes but times have changed. There was hardly any traffic. There was no Health and Safety to worry about. I can remember playing in bombed out houses, finding shrapnel and bits and pieces of peoples lost treasures. Building ships and bombers. Couldn’t do it now without a hard hat and a day-glow jacket.”

“When my dad was my age, he used to say, ‘Growing old is lousy,’ and I always said, ‘It can’t be half as bad as growing up.’ I hated school, well secondary school anyway. What about you?”

“Oh I can’t say I hated it, just got on with it, I suppose. What I do remember about growing up, is not having central heating; the cold, the damp, the steaming washing that was always hanging about, never seemed to dry even on the cloths-horse in front of the fire, blocking out the heat; wearing hand-me-down clothes, and playing with second-hand toys. No, I wouldn’t want to go back to that, thank you.”

“My, we’ve come a long way since those days. We didn’t have a telephone, or a car, or a fridge, or a washing machine, or television ... but we did have a piano.

“And space was still that, space. Then we had jet planes and rockets and men on the moon, and then the chip replaced the valve, and we had computers. Then we had mobiles. Then someone said, ‘I know, let’s put a camera on a ‘phone’. Why would anyone want a camera on a ‘phone? Now see where we are. It’s amazing.”

“I wonder what our grandchildren will have; what they’ll look back on in our time and think it’s all old fashioned. It’s scary and yet exciting.”

“And quite rightly, they think they’ll live for ever; I know I did as a kid. Now I realise, in the grand scheme of things, we’re but a flick of the fingers. There’s no reason to believe the human race is the be all and end all. The Earth had been here for billions of years before we arrived, and we’ll be gone long before the Earth ceases to exist. What’s it all about, eh?”

“Oh crikey, you going all philosophical and metaphysical on me? Can't be doin' wi' that tonight. Hey did you hear Gavin Strange has left his wife; or maybe she left him? Anyway they're not together anymore. The house is up for sale.”

“Really. Always thought they were solid. Well you never know what goes on behind closed doors do yo?. Was someone else involved, there usually is? And he's our age. I wouldn't want to go through all that again, would you?”

“Me? No, anything for a quiet life, that's me. Pipe-and-slippers man me, except I don't smoke. Must be awful nowadays, if you're a smoker, having to go outside for a drag. Did you ever smoke.”

“Of course. Everyone did. It was expected. It was a right-of-passage, a coming-of-age at sixteen when you had your first cigarette. And you?”

“Oh yes. Mind you I started at twelve, rolling my own with toilet paper and my dad's dog ends which I fished out of the ash tray. He smoked untipped Players and Senior Service. I don't know if he knew. Anyway he gave me my first fag on my sixteenth birthday in a café, it was my sister's idea. I always remember later, the feeling of being grown up, when I offered my dad one of mine. After that we always shared. If he had one, he'd offer them to me, and I did the same.”

“I can remember my first drink. My parents were TT, they'd both signed the pledge, it was a sin, drinking. But I can remember it well. My parents took in a lodger to help make ends meet. He was only a couple of years older than me, worked in a nursery, but he had a Lambretta, and we rode to a country pub one evening, where no one would recognise us. Actually even though it *was* a pub, inside it was just a room, and a guy with a peg-leg came through a curtain, carrying a tin tray, well that set us off. We ordered two halves of scrumpy, and you know what that can do to you. When we'd downed that, we left in fits of laughter. How we ever got home I don't know, but when we opened the front door, still falling about laughing, all my mum said was, ‘Hello, did you have a good time?’ and that was that; my first drink.”

“My parents drank socially. From a very early age, I was given small watered down tasters. I think the French do that don't they? Anyway I think it was a good idea, none of the guilt feelings about growing up, there were enough of those anyway.”

“What, you mean about sex? Don't. I wouldn't want to go through that trauma again either. You know, I bet today's kids know more about it than I do even now. If the average age for first having sex is seventeen, there must be a lot at it long before then. Anyway, ‘My days of youth are over, my torch of life is out, what used to be my sex appeal, is now my water spout.’”

“I remember it well. One of the few things I do remember. You know I watch quiz programmes on television, and I realise that my general knowledge is almost non-existent. There are huge gaps in my knowledge, I know nothing about pop music, nothing about sport, and very little about history or geography. Even when I know I know the answer, I can't remember it. It was the same at school; all those lists of dates and tables and French vocab., just couldn't memorise them.”

“Yea, and how do actors remember their lines? Look at Hamlet, he's on stage for nearly three hours. I acted on stage once. I only had fifteen short lines, but it took me weeks to remember them, and even then I was petrified I'd forget them. Never again.”

“Look at those youngsters on University Challenge. Makes me realise we've only got half a brain.”

“I read a great quotation recently, something like, ‘Oxford scholars, know everything about nothing, whereas Cambridge scholars know nothing about everything.’ I think that’s brilliant, even if it’s not true.”

“What about doctors. They have to remember the names of all the different parts of the body, with *itis* stuck on the end when they’re inflamed; years of it. GPs know a little about a lot, specialists now a lot about a little.”

“That’s good. Is that you?”

“Yea. Maybe it all comes down to statistics in the end.”

“What do you mean, statistics? Benjamin Disraeli is reputed to have said, ‘Lies, damned lies and statistics’. So? ”

“Well, memory isn’t just about intelligence. Look at snooker players or gamblers, they can do complicated computations in their heads, but where do they come on the IQ scale? What they *do* have is an acquired skill, honed over years of practice. I bet you’d find them scattered all over the normal curve of distribution.”

“Ah, the bell curve. I wonder where Sylvia Plath would come on it. Or was she *under* it?”

“Well she went to Cambridge, so she must have been almost off the scale, even if she knew nothing about everything.”

“And there’s the bell for last orders, ‘For whom the bell tolls?’

‘It tolls for thee’ mate; your round.”

“Ernest Hemmingway wrote that, but I think Sylvia Plath, experienced it. What’ll it be?”

Howard Brayton 14/02/16