

Smoke and Mirrors

"Mr Bentley."

"MR BENTLEY!"

The voice sounded metallic, surreal, far, far away. Perhaps my hearing aids were acting up again.

And there was a sharp smell of antiseptic, a hospital smell.

I came around slowly, surprised to find myself dressed in a dark green suit with a mauve tie and a lilac shirt. The walls were mirrored glass and everywhere I looked I could see myself. However, my reflections were about sixty years younger, in my prime, aged about twenty-five, with the neat, dark goatee beard I had at that time. It was me. Same hazel green eyes with tiny red flecks, same long nose, left ear slightly damaged from the crash when I was fifteen and the school bus slid off the road on our way to a badminton competition. And the missing thumb on my right hand from my car crash. No doubt about it.

"Mr Bentley. William Gordon Bentley. Please take door C."

A mirrored panel now flashed a large "C" and, as I moved towards it, it hissed open, revealing a brightly lit space filled with smoke. I smiled as the thought flashed, 'smoke and mirrors'. The smell was pungent, reminding me of the crazy night I went to a student party where everyone was smoking hash. Everyone but me and the slim girl with the piercing blue eyes. Sylvia something. Was it Simpson? No, Stimpson with a 't'.

A voice spoke from beyond an opaque panel:

"Well, Billy Bentley, you've made it to us at last. Good to have you back in the fold. Praise the Lord. It's been a long time. Take a seat in the far corner and let's get on with your acclimatisation.

From the recesses of my mind, the voice found a face, a name: Bob Keith, the Reverend Robert Emmanuel Keith from Harrison Memorial Evangelical Church where I had been President of the Youth Fellowship in the years before I met my wife, Irene.

Irene, good night Irene. Very good nights, Irene. I was twenty and she was twenty-six although she said she was only twenty-one. Irene Mackay had led me from the path of righteousness. Understand, I followed most willingly. The power of the flesh. Matter over mind, hormones, lust and love entwined, a desire which did not fade during our twenty-six years together.

Smoke and Mirrors

The aroma changed and the scent of the perfume Irene had doused herself in, liberally, filled my nostrils. She was always a fragrant woman.

Irene had enticed me away from my commitment to my Saviour. Bob and his lovely wife Alice had pleaded with me not to leave but the lure of Irene with her student apartment and her warm, soft lips, her . . .

I heard a soft, plaintive voice singing to my left, my poor side. Anna Maura, the Portuguese Fado singer. My mind lurched ahead to the final image of Irene's shrivelled body ravaged by cancer. I heard myself sob, felt hot tears on my cheeks. I looked towards the source of the singing.

"Please, Billy, be seated." The warm alto voice was familiar but her name would not come.

An odd-looking reclining chair stood empty. It was narrow, dished, soft grey leather, like a futuristic dentist's chair. I eased myself over the lip and slipped down into it. Somewhere underneath it, motors whirred. The surface rippled and settled to accommodate my body shape then the chair rotated into a nearly horizontal attitude, keeping my head slightly up, my feet slightly down. The ripples continued, massaging my back and legs. I relaxed until I felt clamps encircle my ankles and tighten slowly. Firm but not painful. My tummy quivered on the edge of panic and my bladder spasmed. I tried to lift my arms from the armrests to sit upright but my wrists were pinned down with similar clamps. Again, there was no pain, only firm tightness. It was only then I realised I was not wearing socks or shoes and, as I craned my head to look at my feet, I saw I was now naked.

From the swirling mists above me, a canopy started its slow descent. Laser strobes rippled across my body and I realised these strobes were measuring me. From behind the canopy the sound of motors whirred as the canopy shell changed shape.

Ahead of the canopy, I saw a Virtual Reality-Mixed Reality visor approach my head and prepared myself for the slightly claustrophobic feeling to follow, before the show started. The visor gently edged into position, landed lightly on my face, adjusted with tiny vibrations then fixed itself quite firmly in place, excluding all external light intrusion.

The VR-MR scene came into focus, slowly then firmed up, full HD colour, every detail bright and clear.

The screen showed a cramped roof space, an attic room, dominated by a double bed. The only other piece of furniture was a battered tallboy cluttered with baby things: terry-towelling nappies and a tall tin marked National Dried Milk. A calendar was

Smoke and Mirrors

superimposed on the screen which showed November 29, 1947, when I would have been six months old.

On the bed a child was crying. I picked it up, cuddled it. It stopped girning and smiled up at me. It had hazel green eyes with tiny flecks of red in them.

The child was me.

The VR-MR scene changed.

I was standing beside a teacher's desk. The teacher was dressed in a crimson overall. Her face was long, serious, set in a frown. Her white hair, slightly crinkly, was held up in a bun, fixed with many hairpins. She slipped off her high stool, lifted the lid of the high desk, reached under it to remove a wide black strap. Although this strap was brandished most days as a reminder of her ultimate power, it was used only rarely.

Years later, when I was able to understand, I realised her control over us (we numbered around forty-five, set out in six rows of four double desks) came from her acting ability. At times she would pretend to be outraged, rant at us for minutes on end; then she would stop, close her eyes with a sad expression on her face to show how we had disappointed her by pushing her to the edge. Sighing deeply, she would set us a task to be carried out in silence. Then, for the rest of the day, her voice would be soft and gentle. My mother said many times Mrs Shearer was a drama queen.

Some days Mrs Shearer became whimsical, almost forgetting we were there, telling us snippets of her life, recounting adventures she had had when she was our age as a girl in a village in a faraway place called Cumberland. Sometimes her tales were more recent, only weeks or months earlier. Long, detailed stories in which she drove her car to places like St Andrews or Peebles or Melrose where she had seen a ghost in the ruins of its Abbey. Mrs Shearer had a fancy two-tone Hillman Minx, silver and maroon which was parked outside the school gate, the only car in the street.

Her husband, always referred to as "my dear, dear husband, Mr Shearer" was, we learned, an older man who lost a leg playing cricket. A cricket ball, (she had one in her drawer which she passed around the class), had smashed his knee to smithereens and after years of trying to save it, the 'poor, poor leg' had been amputated half way up his thigh. This tale was repeated most weeks and at each telling, she drew diagrams on the blackboard, creating a series which showed the ball hit the knee, then the smashed patella in tiny pieces, and so on through each step of "my dear, dear husband Mr Shearer's" journey of pain to the final image of a genderless manikin with one normal leg and one with a short stump. "Poor, poor Mr Shearer."

Smoke and Mirrors

One day we learned that her dear, dear husband, Mr Shearer had taken her to a wonderful ball at a place called Gleneagles where they had danced, danced, danced all night. She had swirled around the class demonstrating - she always acted out every story. Christine Campbell spotted the contradiction of a man with one leg able to dance, dance, dance.

Christine Campbell was called Bubbles because her mother owned a ladies' hairdressing shop and Christine always had her yellow hair in tight curls. Bubbles was always top of our class except twice when I was top. Bubbles hated me for this and said I had stolen her place by cheating. Although I was wary of her, (she often nipped me when I was not looking), I thought she was the nicest looking, best dressed girl I had ever seen. One day, when we were alone in the cloakroom, she bounced up to me and kissed me on the lips. Then she was off, skipping away like a fairy, leaving me with a red face. The next day she spoiled my romantic illusions by saying: "Don't you ever brush your teeth? If you don't brush your teeth, your teeth will go bad and no one will ever want to kiss you again."

Years later, after she left university, I heard she had married a dentist and lived in Troon.

In this way, for the most part, by her acting ability, Mrs Shearer held us in her thrall for three consecutive years; Primary 4, 5 and 6, the happiest of my school years. Her strap, which she called Black Bess, although seldom used in earnest, was regularly taken from her desk and whacked down loudly on the free desk beside Stewart McCluskey, the class bully and bad guy. We all knew she was doing this to try to wipe the smirk off his face. But the truth was, even Stewart wanted to please Mrs Shearer. We all did.

In the VR-MR sequence I could hear and see the whole dreadful event unfold again, feel the heat in my face and the beginnings of tears behind my eyes. Indignation, shame, embarrassment, fear of pain, fear of showing pain.

I had been the unlucky one. It could have been any of four or five others who had passed on the folded piece of paper. Mrs Shearer has been sitting on her high stool with her desk lid up, her face hidden as the note had been passed from pupil to pupil. From the back of the class I saw it start at Stewart McCluskey who was sitting in the front row, in the dunce's spot, right in front of Mrs Shearer's desk. It made its way rapidly from hand to hand with the whispered message "for Bubbles".

Unfortunately, I had been the last in the chain, caught reaching across the narrow corridor between my seat as second top, across to Christine, who, being top of the class, was awarded a double desk to herself. At the point of transfer, before Bubbles had opened the grubby note, Mrs Shearer had screeched:

Smoke and Mirrors

'Billy Bentley bring that here at once.'

When she opened it, I glimpsed it; it was a coloured-in version of a drawing of a dripping cock with large balls which had been going the rounds in the playground the day before, drawn by someone's big brother.

'Oh, Billy, Billy, Billy. You of all people. If I had not seen you do it with my own eyes, I would not have believed you capable of such a despicable act.'

She let Black Bess unroll to dangle by her side.

'Hands up! And do not disappoint me further by pulling them away. Take the full six like a man.'

The blows, when they fell, were light, feathery. I kept my face down until it was over.

'Get out of my sight. Stand outside in the corridor for the rest of the afternoon. Tomorrow we shall all start again with a clean sheet.'

Later, at the interval, in the playground, Stewart McCluskey called me over to his gang, away from the others I was playing football with. He gave me two penny dainties.

'Thanks fur no' shoppin' me. Did ye see she held back on ye?'

He then shooed me away and called over Thomas McIntyre, the smallest boy in the class and made him give over his poke of sherbet lemons.

Stewart then led his gang off to the back wall of the outdoor toilets where there was a crack high in the brick joints where they said you could see into the girls' toilets. Working in pairs, boys in his gang had to let Stewart stand on their shoulders to peer through.

Thomas was crying again. Thomas was always crying. I gave him one of the dainties but he kept on crying. Then I realised he had wet his pants. Poor Thomas. A few months later his father got a new job in a place we had heard of but had no idea where it was. A place called East Kilbride. I never saw Thomas McIntyre again.

The VR-MR scene changed.

I was in a sailing dinghy which we were using as a fishing boat, with a cheap, spinning rod, taking turns to catch mackerel. It was glimmer dark, gloaming so probably around ten o'clock. The dark sea was like a mill pond. Every cast brought an energetic, plunging fish. We had dozens at our feet, adding another with every cast.

Smoke and Mirrors

The memory of the circumstances came flooding back. I was with my friend Alan and his friend. Was he called George? We were camping near Campbeltown, under canvas in an ancient Bell tent, in a farmer's field, directly opposite Davaar Island, close to a military pier which had been vacant, grey and forbidding since we had arrived almost two weeks earlier, as if abandoned, forgotten. We were with Stephen's Boys' Club annual Glasgow Fair summer camp, three youths sharing tent, part of a contingent of about thirty. I was nineteen, I think. Alan and George did not work in the shipyard but I managed to get them free places. Numbers were down; a group of older boys had pulled out at the last minute in favour of a packaged holiday to Benidorm.

Without warning, the hillside behind us was ablaze with light, revealing a series of bunker oil tanks embedded in the hillside above the pier, partly concealed by tiered lawns of neatly mown grass. In daylight the camouflage had worked so well we had not noticed it but now, revealed by the glare of dozens of bright lights, it was impressive. We learned later it was a NATO re-fuelling station.

Over our shoulders we heard a swishing sound and as we turned towards it, a submarine surfaced from the depths of Campbeltown Loch. It was only about a hundred yards away. Had they seen us? Did they know we were there? Were we breaking any rules by fishing near the pier?

The long, dark sausage shape chugged passed us, causing us to wobble violently. We could have been drowned, we said to each other, indignantly.

The next cast from the rod was retrieved as before but now nothing chased or snapped at the hook. The shoal of mackerel had been dispersed by the arrival of this 'monster fish'.

As the sub moored alongside the pier, men spilled out of the vessel onto its deck before climbing onto the pier then mooring before connecting the submarine, using several hoses led to various points to take on fuel. A small rubber dinghy was brought on deck, inflated, lowered over the side and three seamen climbed down a rope ladder into it. An officer shouted down the final order for fish suppers and the dinghy roared off down the loch towards Campbeltown. We watched for a few minutes more before rowing back to our campsite. If we had been spotted, we had been ignored but we lay awake for an hour or so letting our imaginations run riot, expecting a fully armed military patrol of crack marines to seek us out for questioning as Russian spies.

The next morning the sub was gone. Proudly, we presented our haul of 38 mackerel to the chef, an agency man hired for the fortnight to feed us all. Roberto had once owned a fish and chip shop in Port Glasgow, he told us in a mangled Italian-Scottish accent. He looked at our dried-out fish, muttered something under his breath and shooed us away

Smoke and Mirrors

with our catch. We fed the stale mackerel to seagulls, flinging them high out to sea and watching them swoop and bicker over them.

An hour or so after breakfast, the bedding inside Roberto's tent caught fire. As we all raced around dowsing it with buckets of water, he emerged, very drunk, rubbing his eyes against the acrid clouds of dark fumes billowing from the door of his very soggy tent. He had fallen asleep while smoking.

The next day, the last of the holiday, our 'tent', (me, Alan and George), was assigned to help Roberto pack his things, dismantle his singed tent and pack it into its cylindrical canvas bag for return to Blacks of Greenock. As we moved out his gear, an old battered suitcase split apart and a dozen or so empty whisky bottles tumbled out.

Our tents had been erected in a field mown a few days prior to our arrival but the grass had been left to dry for hay. During our holiday, every tent had been engaged in constant warfare against earwigs, requiring twice daily fumigation to clear them out from our bedding and their other favourite nooks and crannies.

Roberto, when not on duty in his wooden hut with his gas stoves, pots and pans, had closeted himself in his tent ignoring the fumigation instruction. As a consequence, Roberto's tent was heaving with earwigs, literally millions of them.

The VR-MR scene changed.

I was at HMS Cochrane, a shore-based establishment which was part of Rosyth Naval Base located in sight of the iconic Forth Railway Bridge.

It would be the Spring of 1977, I think, making me nearly thirty, sporting a full dark beard. I had been on the staff at Strathclyde for over a year when I responded to an advertisement in the staff magazine. The Universities' Royal Naval Unit (Glasgow and Strathclyde) were seeking a Unit First Lieutenant. Like the Officer Training Corps (OTC), the purpose of the URNU was to attract young men and women students and encourage them to make a career in the armed forces.

In due course, I was competitively interviewed into second place and another much more likely candidate was appointed to the post. However, the interview panel liked 'the cut of my jib' and offered me a post as a "temporary, acting sub-lieutenant - URNU only". On hearing the news, my father had immediately pointed out that the URNU, dangling below the local RNR establishment at HMS Graham in Govan, was probably the lowest outpost of the Admiralty Board and he dubbed me as the lowest ranking officer in the Queen's Royal Navy.

Smoke and Mirrors

On arrival at HMS Cochrane, I reported to reception at the officers' mess and was shown to my cabin by a steward, a small deferential man with a distinct limp.

'Slipped on a gangway, sur. Stupid, really. It wiz ma ain fault. But it goat me outta goann tae Vietnam, eh? Even though we wurnae really there, wink, wink. Three o' my best mates goat caught landin' some SAS boys and got kept fur years in undergrun' jails, eh?'

Trying to establish a distant rapport I said, 'My Dad was an Able Seaman conscripted during the war, sailing out of Malta for nearly three years in an old diesel-electric S-class submarine, HMS Sybil. They did that, landing and picking up agents. Topsides, he was a gun-layer on the little Pom-Pom gun. Submerged he was a hydroplane operator. After D-Day he ended up in Dunrobin Castle for rest and convalescence, as his skipper's steward. They were both shattered, post-trauma stress they call it nowadays.'

'Wiz he, sur? So, is that why yer in the RNR? Causey yer auld man, eh?'

'No, no. I'm a lecturer at Strathclyde University. I'm in the URNU, sent here on a Basic Ship Fire-fighting Course. Just here for the weekend.'

'Ach, sur, yer no here wi Bert Smart, ur ye? He's some man, is Bert. Whit a guy wi the wee arras he is. Cleant up wi the darts lads in the senior rate's mess last night. Won himself a wee favour wi the workshop boys. They're a' doon at yer auld wee bit o' a boatie the noo, trying tae fix it fir yis.'

CPO Bertram Smart was the 'Swain' (coxswain) of HMS Droxford, a small inshore patrol vessel built in 1954. By 1977 was virtually superannuated. The Droxford's gearbox had been 'a challenge' for years past. As an URNU vessel, Droxford ranked lowest on the dockyard authority's list of priorities.

In my individual cabin in the officers' mess, I stowed my gear and donned my uniform. My sub-lieutenant's one-stripe epaulette and ring enclosing the giveaway 'R' denoted my lowly status as a Royal Naval Reserve Officer. It was now well after three o'clock and the dockyard was emptying rapidly as I made my way towards Droxford to let Bert know I was around. Earlier in my career, while serving my apprenticeship as a draughtsman in Stephen's shipyard, I had gained a good working knowledge of ships, including frigates, built for the navy. I was keen to see HMS Droxford at last, my very first ship as an RNR officer!

At that stage I had not been on the two-week SIC (Short Introductory Course) to Royal Naval College, Dartmouth and my notions of naval etiquette were hazy. However, as I had read lots of novels about seafarers and been briefed by my father, I was aware that when in uniform I must obey the demands of naval hierarchy. If I met a more senior officer, lieutenant or above, I must salute first, a salute which would be returned or not, at the whim of the senior man. Perhaps if I met another sub-lieutenant who did not have

Smoke and Mirrors

an 'R' in his epaulette I, being notionally lower, should salute first? On this I was unsure. What should I do if I met another sub-lieutenant with an 'R'? Do officers of equal status salute one another? I had no idea.

Should I meet a rating I would be on secure ground: I knew from my father that any rating of any rank must offer a salute FIRST to any officer, even one with an 'R' in his epaulette. My father had served under several RNVR officers during the war and I knew from him, these men had made a major contribution to the War Effort.

In any event, the matter of 'officer on officer' did not arise during my walk to Droxford. When I saw two petty officers approach, I smartened my step, squared my shoulders and watched them nervously, my right arm ready to swing up and round into position as my father had rehearsed me. The two men shared a joke as they approached and looked beyond me. When one started to raise his hand, my right hand shot up and my head turned towards them in an acknowledging return salute. However, the man's hand merely scratched his nose and both men sauntered past me. Seconds later they shared another joke and laughed quietly. In theory, I could, according to my father, have 'placed them on a charge'. Magnanimously, I decided to let the incident pass. Various other ratings passed me during the next few minutes: none saluted me, nor I them.

On arrival at Droxford, I stood at the gangway and called out. "Ahoy, Droxford!" In my understanding of it, I must not go aboard without permission. There was no reply. After several further 'hails', a voice from on high shouted, "Sir, they're all below. They've been down there for hours, Sir."

I looked up towards the voice and saw a fresh-faced young rating standing on the f'c'stle (forecastle) of a shiny new frigate, a modern version of those we had built at Stephen's in the 1960s.

I waved a thanks and went down the rickety gangway onto the poop deck and followed the sounds of voices forwards to an open doorway at which a steep companionway led down to another open doorway. I could not see anyone but heard Bert's distinctive Portsmouth twang say: "Here goes for nothing."

The engines sprang to life filling the confined space with a thundering rumble. After a minute or so there was a huge jolt as the gearbox engaged and I staggered forward and grabbed hold of a handgrip to prevent myself from falling into the engine space below.

There was no point trying to say anything to Bert and his dockyard friends so I retreated a step backwards away from the doorway to escape the din.

Smoke and Mirrors

Behind me, I became aware of shouting, whistles blowing and a hooter sounding urgent blasts in what may have been Morse code but to me was unintelligible.

*I looked back towards the gangway and saw men hurtling down it, shouting at me in angry, urgent voices. The lead man, a burly seaman wearing a lanyard with a whistle dangling from it spat in my face: "Get these Effing engines shut down at once, **Sur!**"*

Frozen, I did nothing and he brushed me aside and thundered down the companionway to the engine space. Seconds later, the engines stopped, replaced by a harsh, scolding voice saying: "Fur Eff's sake, Bert, ye nearly snapped yer moorings. If yehiddah, ye'd huv smacked back intae us, son. Eff's sake, Bert, oor new Effing boat's onlay Effing weeks auld. Some o' the paint oanitts no' even dry. Whit the Eff dae ye think yer playin' it, son? An whit's tha daft wan-striper up there daein? Shood he no be keepin' an eye out fur ye?"

Following a hot and blasphemous exchange of views which lasted only a few minutes the debate descended into friendly banter before the burly man and his motley crew trooped around me and returned to their still intact multi-million-pound vessel. No one looked at me, no salutes were exchanged. To them, I simply did not exist.

Luckily for me, Bert and the burly man with the lanyard were former shipmates. Bert promised me the matter would go no further. Later, when I told my father what had happened, he pointed out that, in theory, because I was the only officer on board HMS Droxford at the time of the incident, I could have been faced a Court Martial. In the Navy, ignorance is no defence, he said.

The VR-MR scene changed again.

I was alone, making my way along a snowy path, in an area I thought I knew well. During the first years of my retirement I had spent hundreds of hours walking Sheba our Border Collie, around the Mugdock Country Park, nearby woods and secret places seldom visited by others. When Sheba died, I gave up walking but still felt I knew the place well.

A late afternoon, January, the light was fading fast. We were three days into a Baltic Low settled over Scotland with more cold weather to come. My car was about a mile away in a lay-by, hidden under overhanging bushes, not in the car park which I knew would be locked at 4 pm. I was out among the woods, off piste deliberately, sheltering from the bitter wind, walking an energetic young labradoodle called Benji for a neighbour who had fallen on the ice and badly twisted her ankle. Benji must have spotted a fox or a deer and had raced off barking into the gloom, in pursuit of his prey, ignoring my pleas that he return "at once!"

Smoke and Mirrors

I called his name at the top of my voice until I was hoarse. It then occurred to me someone may have collared him, spotted the telephone number on his tag and called my friend. Maybe Benji was home already, fast asleep in front of Rita's log fire, dreaming of rabbits.

After a fumble, I found my mobile phone deep in my layers of clothing and fired it up. No signal. Almost at once the screen dimmed then blacked out. When had I last charged it up? Weeks? Probably months.

I scanned around and saw my track snake in a wide curve and disappear into the trees. In my chase after Benji I had lost my bearings. However, instinct told me the quickest way back to where I had parked, where I could recharge my mobile, was straight on. Two paces later, I plunged through a sheet of ice covering a hidden burn and was immediately chest deep in icy water, snow falling in on top of me, filling my nose and mouth, forcing my eyes shut. As a younger man and even into my early seventies, I might have scrambled out but my struggle lasted only a few minutes.

I felt a searing heat rise through me from my chest and my head thudded louder and louder until darkness and silence brought relief.

I was no longer cold. The room was warm, brightly lit, with a hint of lavender in the air from the furniture polish on the old-fashioned bench-type pews. I was viewing a scene from the early 1950s, from the back row, in the top of the class position, watching and listening to ragged children singing to the thump of a piano at the Friday night Band of Hope gathering at Greenview Gospel Hall in Pollokshaws.

When they began to sing "Jesus wants me for a sunbeam", I tried to join in but I found I was too tired to sing.

I closed my eyes, leaned back into the corner and fell asleep.

"Mr Bentley."

"MR BENTLEY!"

The voice sounded metallic, surreal, far, far away. Perhaps my hearing aids were acting up again.

And there was a sharp smell of antiseptic, a hospital smell.

I came around slowly, surprised to find myself dressed in a dark green suit with a mauve tie and a lilac shirt. The walls were mirrored glass and everywhere I looked I could see myself. However, my reflections were about sixty years younger, in my prime aged

Smoke and Mirrors

about twenty-five, with the neat, dark goatee beard I had at that time. It was me, same hazel green eyes with tiny red flecks, same long nose, left ear slightly damaged from the crash when I was fifteen and the school bus slid off the road on our way to a badminton competition. And the missing thumb on my right hand from my car crash. No doubt about it.

"Mr Bentley. William Gordon Bentley. Please take door C."