



## Snapshots of a life

Depression sometimes overcame George, when he thought about how he had meandered through life: from one impulse to the next, rarely planning too much.

*“Nowadays,” he mused, “Every youngster I bump into seems to forward-plan their life. Why on Earth didn’t I do the same?”*

Mild depression. Nothing up to considering *rehab* or anything like that. Contemplation of suicide was out of the question, though on a couple of occasions he had teased himself with thoughts about *planning his exit*: a term he picked up after attending funerals in Africa, and which he thought was sort of humorous.

*“Exit to where?”* he deliberated, inwardly smiling ... *“Down the pub!?”*

Anyway, it *was* depression, but not that serious, nothing in the realms of life-threatening. His (shall we call it) *down-time*, usually lasted for less than a day. After a few events had joined forces to knock him off his comfort podium, feelings of rejection and despair would creep over him, like an all-enveloping ominous fog drifting in from the sea, usually reaching its zenith as he pulled the bedsheets over his head, with despondent thoughts and images dueling for space, running rings around his brain.

But usually, come the next day's dawn, with sunrays streaming through his white mesh curtains, his familiar all-accommodating stoic self would resume transmission. Dark and gloomy might warrant a down-mood extension, but because he lived in a hot and sunny part of the world, coupled with the fact that these character slumps occurred only two or three times each year, it was a safe bet that by the morning after the night before he would be back to his usual self, ready to meet and greet all-comers head on.

George adored Italy and the natives who lived there. Outside Italy maybe not so much, and their soccer team he came to view as something below an accepted level of fair play, reaching the pinnacle of indecency by goading Zizu, one of the most respected players on the planet, into a vicious head butt! So what if his mother was what they said she was, that was no excuse to introduce the notion onto the playing field.

Aside from all that, those ordinary guys and gals who voted to stay in the venerated seat of the Roman empire, and not take off to some enticing land of opportunity (such as Australia) - or enlist for the national *Azzurri* team - were the most delightful bunch. He admired their *pregos* and *prontos*, wine at lunchtime with afternoon siesta to follow. Sometimes he even asked himself:

*“if God - or whoever is in charge of such things - can give me license to begin again, can he organize my re-birth as a swarthy, curly-haired Italian ... in Italia?”*

As he grew older, he began to adopt the Italian siesta idea on a regular basis, so that wherever under the afternoon sun he felt his increasingly less-mobile frame struggling under the strain, he would retire to bed – or any other convenient reclining site - lie back, close his eyes, and think of days gone by. On these half-waking, half-doing occasions, his memory unearthed visions from the back of his mind, from what seemed to be an extensive vault containing photos and videos from days gone by; even back to the time of puffy-cheeked toddler days, but others more recent, all in turn carried forward to be scanned by his inbuilt mind's eye ... his personal radar system.

A decent proportion of these *viewings* were genuinely formed by his own memory of happenings at the time, whilst others, particularly the earlier sightings, were conceivably supported by items he had seen, or things he had heard from 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: different visions relating to specific time-zones. Accordingly, the images were presented in formats appropriate to both the event and the era they were drawn from, ranging from tattered sepia-photos from the 1950s, through to full colour HD video clips with *Dolby* sound, from more recent times.

Though his life was certainly far from a morbid procession of doom and gloom, George often thought of his existence – and the images presented - being divided into diverse areas of adversity, ranging from love challenges and business debacles, through to health issues and near-death happenings.

An example of an incident which was close to fatal could be presented as a short colour film, taken from the viewpoint of a person drowning, looking across the waves to a beach in the distance. This was exactly as George remembered it. With indistinct voices coming from the direction of the shore, the video pans across the waves to focus on a swimmer struggling valiantly to reach him. It was a vivid experience, confined to his memory: no family or friends present, and his gallant lifesaver vanishing after dumping him on the sand, never to be seen again. Thus, no verbal or written account of the event and certainly no photographic imagery. His recall was all there was to go by.

George thought of these séance-like experiences as *Snapshots of his Life*. At each siesta he would lay back, eyes closed, ready to conjure the next image, before viewing and filing according to time-zone and state and stage of life it had been plucked from.

One vision, often repeated, came in the form of an old box-brownie photo: sepia toned, bedraggled edges. George stood centre-front and smiling in his Sunday best; dark hair, carefully combed sideways, holding hands with two slightly younger boys, each topped

with a mop of blonde curls. A noticeably stunning woman, arm-in-arm with a tall fair-haired man, stood directly behind him. Surrounding the central figures were two or three tiers of men and women, looking like different takes on *Humphrey Bogart* or *Vivien Leigh* auditioning for *Casablanca*. A family gathering from a distant era.

We can recline with George, now towards the opposite end of the age spectrum - lying back in siesta mood - to see which visions of the past his mind brings forward to the present. After a few minutes a video rolls by, appearing out of the blue in black and white, more because of actual circumstance than design. He has a view of snow and ice ...from ground level. He has fallen over, not because of the snow or the ice, though that of course may have added to the problem, but largely due to the fact he is totally drunk. As he struggles to stand, he notices vomit on his scarf. Then he is entering a house, arm in arm with an older youth to prevent another fall. The clip ends with a raging-bull father punching his son (George's friend) in the hallway of the house.

*"Don't you ever try this again you little bastard!"* the father roars. Then with a final haymaker the son slumps to the floor, blood pouring from his nose. Fade to black.

George recognized these glimpses of the past were not necessarily arranged in chronological sequence. They could occur in a variety of formats and in any sort of order. For example, the black and white film mentioned above, and the earlier-described sepia photo of a family gathering, were snatched instances from events many years apart, with George as a toddler in the photo, then a teenager in the film. They showed an enormous contrast between the angel faced kid in the sepia print, compared to the gangly, vomit splattered youth with an *Elvis* hair do, in the video. It seemed to show things had veered off-track in the intervening period. The events portrayed were only twelve years apart, but in terms of substance, it could have been light years.

The *snapshots* that came into view, were there because they recalled events that were engraved on his brain cells: tattooed with indelible ink on that grey matter inside his skull. For much of the time in our lives, most of us – in fact if we dissect the truth, probably all of us – do ordinary things. We eat and we sleep, we wash the dishes, and

we clean our shoes: forgettable events because the same thing happens over and over again. In contrast, the really memorable episode does not repeat itself - or at least, repeats itself very infrequently - and stands out because it says something new; something unfamiliar; something rare.

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

George was re-viewing a short colour video, which included that rare *Fassbinder* quality of *reification*, whereby the camera zooms in and fixes on its subject. The video had to be in colour, because of the object being *reified* - his underpants – which had mustard-coloured, shit stains all over them! He thought he had hidden them well enough behind the pan, in the school’s toilet block. Now he squirmed – pant-less - in his seat. But there was no capitulation to the stern interrogation session, even though the aroma around the wriggling boy tended to give the game away! This was one of his most persistent and harrowing memories from early schooldays.

Those visions that recurred on many occasions often reflected a variety of near-death experiences. George considered himself to be like a cat with nine lives, whose amazing death-defying feats, were scattered across his continuing presence on Earth. The incidents concerned could be presented one by one, floating through the mind waves at different times ...or stacked together, side by side, like doom-laden toast in a stainless-steel, near-fatalities rack.

In such a way, three short video clips, all in glorious technicolour, materialized from the depths and swung into view, intertwined with each-other. With these exhibits, sound - or lack of it in two of them - was perhaps the most important element.

(*Video No.1*) George’s gaze was focused on the pilot of the *Piper Cherokee*, as he fought valiantly with the control buttons, his plane gliding on a downward trajectory towards the greenish-blue waters of *Spencer’s Gulf*, a motionless propeller up front and the only sound being the woosh of air rushing past the

cockpit windscreen. Miraculously, when down to shark spotting level, the engine burst into life and they soared skywards once again.

*(Video No.2)* Suddenly, the incredibly loud boom of exploding grenades and gunfire pushed into view, as George could be seen running - as fast as the objects in his path could allow him - accompanied by other similarly hapless souls towards the rear of the store, where staff beckoned them to safety. This insider's view of the Al-Shabaab attack on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, was perhaps his most infamous *nine lives* moment.

*(Video No.3)* The trilogy ended in silence with dust returning to earth; the upside-down still-smoking wreck from which George had just scrambled, as the backdrop. He had been travelling in what was termed a *speed-taxi*, through hills West of Africa's Great Rift Valley. Into the film came voices talking in other tongues - dark-skinned members of the *Kalingen* tribe - tentatively poking and pinching his skin to make sure he was still alive!

These were extremely harrowing moments from a sometimes-fraught life, so George needed to take a breather and collect his thoughts. He 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 desperately trying to find the file he knew explained it all.

Suddenly it was there: a longer, more recent presentation in full colour. He was seated in an armchair, holding a cup of coffee, opposite a white-haired man, somewhat older and perhaps a degree wiser than George could claim to be. The man may have been older, but his 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?"*

At the end of the clip, George could be seen staring back, trying to match the gaze of the older man; striving to remain calm and composed about it all.

With those imposing questions hanging in the air, the video receded from view and George was left in contemplative mood yet again. This video was probably the most frequently re-occurring of all the memories, but it was also the most perplexing: the one most difficult to explain. And those final questions from the old man still haunted him.

After a short while thinking about the *mystical aura* video, as he liked to call it, George began to doze again when another dramatic film was presented to the scanner. This time he was in England, behind the wheel of his favourite jet-black, 16 valve Ford: faster than anything else he had driven on four wheels! It was a serene summer's afternoon in the Cotswold Hills. Rounding a bend, George saw a slow-moving lorry up ahead.

Gauging the distance to the next right-hand bend, he instinctively felt himself pressing his foot to the floor, the car responding with acceleration powers that pushed him back into the driver's seat. Pulling alongside the truck he saw in the distance another car rounding the next corner, coming towards him at speed. Using all the power the car possessed and his accumulated skills from decades of driving, he tore past the truck, whipping the steering wheel first left, then right, just managing to zig-zag in front of the lumbering vehicle before the oncoming car screamed past, with inches to spare. The video faded away with a shot of George - having pulled onto the verge - slumped at the wheel and breathing heavily. He knew full-well, he had been a hair's breadth from meeting his maker. Could his old friend have been right about the aura?

But it wasn't all tragedy and trauma: his lifelong treasury held many fond memories dotted here and there across time and place; many featuring calamitous adventures, but redeemed by others in between, thankfully touching on the hilarious.

At that very moment, George, feeling in the mood for a bit of hilarity – and hoping to cast a sparkle of sunshine on his siesta of the day - smiled inwardly, as a once familiar sight of the front bar of a small-town pub in the backblocks of South Australia came into view. The sun was long-gone over the horizon by the time this typically spartan, wooden-floored bar was starting to come to life. A grossly overworked barmaid struggled valiantly to keep up with the demand for *schooners* of beer, as two or three dozen sun-

bronzed men - some wearing the iconic bushman's hat - talked at each other, with ever-increasing volume, in small groups.

George, leaning on the bar, was part of a group where an argument seemed to be brewing – fueled by the beer - between a farmer friend named Glen and a couple of local shearers. It was noticeable that one of the shearers boasted a veritable forest of black curly hair, which spread out of his grubby white vest, up to his neck and shoulders. Suddenly, there was a bit of a skirmish, and Glen, whipping a lighter from the bar, lifted the big man's singlet and set fire to the hairy growth. In a flash the flames swept up the man's chest, engulfing his singlet in a serious blaze. The drinkers around the now flaming man all turned towards him in amazement, and some – quite wisely – began to fling the beer they were drinking over the guy, in order to douse the flames.

After a minute or so of smoke and a lingering smell of burnt hair, the smoldering man, with crispy-brown fragments of singlet hanging from his body and standing in a pool of beer, looked down at his hairless chest in disbelief, then turned to face his adversary, insulted and belittled by what had just happened:

*“Well fuck you, and your worthless fucking farm Mister Moroney,”* he said, red in the face, partly from anger, but also from the hairy-chest inferno which had just occurred. Then continuing in similar vein, he added: *“And you can go and fuck your useless fucking sheep too, coz I'm never coming back to your decrepit fucking place, to do it for you!!”* That said, he stormed out of the bar, slamming the door with all his might, leaving the brass doorbell clanging in his wake.

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As he got older, siesta *viewing* times became more frequent, but George often noticed the memories usually 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 Australia were common, he was less likely to strike material that reflected 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 became camcorder with HDD format, but regardless of the technology, he had created enduring markers of his life. Locations were scattered across four continents, with only the extraordinary passing muster for storage and safe keeping, never the mundane.

Those unique incidents extruded from thousands, possessed elements that set them apart. The connected images of his 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 outside the bathroom for those few precious minutes when disaster struck). Thus, imagination too, he realized - coupled with guilt in this case - could play 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 this could be 4,000 girls, in cultural dress, standing to sing the Indian national anthem in Andhra Pradesh, or in singular form, seeing and hearing Tracy, a brilliant 11-year-old orator, from a simple rural school in Kenya (one of his outstanding African memories). When later he took this young girl to speak about climate change to ten thousand school heads, the people there asked: *“Which private school does she come from?”*

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 toddler, alongside his daughter dancing on Juhu Beach in 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 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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