See, Hear and Speak

By Robert Alan Evans

Having a Look

I’ve never had a thought Not really People have them, don’t they? I can see them, but I’ve never had one I haven’t really needed to I’m not sure I’d want to I’m really not sure.

There’s a man with an odd shaped head there It’s very big It must be something he carries every day Do you ever get used to that Do you forget? Can he forget? with everyone what-notting him all the time, looking at him and making him feel strange and alone?

I don’t look at them. I try not to, but you can’t really can you? You can’t not look, but you can pretend you weren’t, or you can smile and really pay attention and smile though so they know it’s not in a bad way, it’s just you…looking at their head…or their arms… whatever it is. Facial disfigurement Those blotches They’re a shock Was a shock this morning, him just sitting there like that. Like he was sitting up. All covered in blood. I wasn’t expecting that.

There’s a bottle rolls back and forth. I did look because I didn’t know what else to do. I didn’t want to attract attention to myself, but I did look because you do, don’t you? You just have to and you might say to yourself ‘Don’t look Don’t look Just stay here Just stay looking out the front like you’re normal Like you’re a resting person looking out the window with nothing to worry about at all.’

But I couldn’t. I had to look.

Lucozade. Didn’t think they made that anymore. Wasn’t it all those runners once? Who’s running now? Who’s running and drinking Lucozade? They don’t do that now They’re drinking sports drinks or shakes or other things They’re just drinking water now That’s what they’ve found out You don’t need anything else You don’t need sugar and salt and fat All those things they said were good for you, they’re not good for you at all. Margarine.

Oh god. Just…

Calm it down.

There’s a black man halfway back, but that’s it He’s old though, so he’s not a problem Old people aren’t the problem It’s young people that are the problem To me They’re always ruffling my feathers. He’s old He looks poor Like all the people on busses He has those trousers. Smart. Dressed. That’s what they’re like, the old They take care, even when they haven’t got much Doesn’t take much to have manners To buy a coat To let a lady go first.

Why did I wear this? A puffa jacket With fur trim Who do I think I am? Mutton dressed as lamb. Remember that. Gran saying that. Even when I was little ‘mutton dressed as lamb.’

‘Fuck off y’old cow!’

Talking to me like that When I was getting ready Some dance Or some treat with the girls The boy

‘How do you think that makes me feel eh? EH?

You think I wanna go out now, with your old bones rattling round my ears. Your old chinwag rattling in my lug holes eh?’

‘I’ll have no confidence now.’

‘Oh, you’re alright’ that’s what she’d say. Grumble it from her old chair.

‘What’s that nan?’

‘You’re alright. Have a nice night’.

Dead now She’s dead All are All them old timers. Not him though He’s still there Smart trousers.

‘Hello’ I say. I shouldn’t say that. Get a grip. Control yourself.

Out the window it’s all fucking grey. Right down to Wapping. Bridges and people and crossing and crossing and crossing again.

Can you see the palace? Yeah. You can see it all if you want. On my bus. There’s the Taj Mahal I think. There’s the pyramids. The Trevi Fountains. Anything I want. Westfield. It’s my bus and I can do what I want. Imagine the Thames all lined with people. Thronged. The barges. People don’t expect me to know things like that, but I have a very healthy interest in history. Especially the Tudor period. The coronations that would happen on the water. The silk and brocades and red velvet. The heads cut off. Oh the power they had then. Not anymore. Not now. She’s just a stuffed dolly-wobble sitting in her tower. Oh I know we’re meant to respect her. Especially us old people, and I’m going to include myself in that because I am over 60, which does come as a surprise to a lot of people, but I know there’s people think that’s old.

Doesn’t feel like it.

Can’t say it does really.

Doesn’t feel that different.

Why should I? Why should I respect her? All the shit that happened. All the misery and vileness. The time when I was 10 and we didn’t even have shoes. The time when mum had to sell herself. No one wanted her.

Why should I respect authority?

I will not.

Old bitch.

Wish she’d fucking die. Take her teeth with.

Though they’re probably indestructible.

Crown. That blue sash.

Up to me, I’d see them strangle her with it.

Right there on the throne.

Gouge her eyes out.

Burn her entrails.

Bury her at the crossroads in an unmarked van.

I’d be the new power in the land.

…

I am silly.

…

Why not? Why shouldn’t I be?

It’s all fluke anyway.

Who you’re born to.

Who you’re born.

Who you are.

Why he was born.

Like that.

That thing in him.

I said to him. You should get out. You should do something.

Wrong.

That was wrong.

Learned that now.

From all the webchats.

Said I should’ve let him be. I shouldn’t’ve tried to look after him.

But you do.

Don’t you?

I do.

I did.

Would’ve been like letting something rot otherwise.

You don’t do that.

You wash it.

Keep it clean. Keep it from going off.

Then you eat it.

But that’s not really…

That’s just what came to mind.

See, I said. I’ve never had an idea.

So that’s why I…

Why he’s not an orange.

Why I can’t even look after him.

Couldn’t.

Because I can’t even describe him.

Couldn’t.

He’s not an orange.

Isn’t.

Wasn’t.

All I know is that he would hide it all. Up in his room. He would hide it all, but one day.

It was just a fucking Tuesday or something. It was just a very boring day.

I had a shopping bag and a beige coat then.

A double glazed back door.

He can’t have heard me.

It was soft closing. The old one was fucked. Was glad when they changed it. Bit of life to the place.

And I suppose I wanted to surprise him because I took off my shoes.

Crept up the stairs.

And I didn’t knock.

I dunno what I was thinking.

I just wanted to know.

And I walked in and the pain.

The pain of that boy. My boy.

He was on the bed. All curled over and the pain.

I knew it.

I just hadn’t seen it.

It was like I’d torn off a plaster then.

The look he gave me.

Being alone is sacred. I know that now.

You can’t just break it.

Because you can see the pain, but you can’t make it better.

I know that now.

I know what I did was wrong.

I should’ve slammed the back door loud as I could. Should’ve rattled the double glazing.

I should’ve sung a song.

I would’ve sung this one.

La la la la

La la la la

I should’ve stomped my feet up the stairs.

I should’ve screeched and slammed the walls and cried and sneezed and blown my nose.

I should’ve walked so slow as he had time to put himself back together.

I’d do all that now.

If I’d known.

But I wanted to know.

You do, don’t you?

You wanna know.

You wanna have a look.

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Peanuts

I have little to go on, but for the fact that that he didn’t really look at me while he was saying it.

That’s not enough.

I have little to go on, but for the fact that I suddenly felt very stupid inside. In a way that I found deeply confusing. It was only later I realised it was my instincts. He had denied them. He’d said he wasn’t there that night. He said he’d been out buying peanuts. For both of us, which made it doubly confusing because I have recently developed an allergy and I can’t remember if it had already started back then, or if it’s one of the many things I’ve developed since.

I’ve developed brittle bones.

And a palpitation.

I can’t sleep sometimes.

I have these bags which play havoc with my sex life now.

I look terrible.

I’ve tried to…

Fuck, I’ve tried to…

Oh what’s the fucking word?

I’ve tried to negate-

No.

Offset. Yes! I’ve tried to offset them in several ways.

First I applied a light foundation. It was called ‘Softouch’ with one of the ‘t’s missing in it. Softah-

Softouch.

It was designed for exactly this situation. People not sleeping. The bags. The dreadful demands of a dating app.

I’ve had to create so many profiles.

At first I took my time. I answered all the questions. I wanted people to know who I really was. I said I wanted love ultimately, but that I was open minded in the mean time.

Of course that led to several hundred cock shots.

I was disgusted by the first. This purple breathing thing looking at me from the screen. He must’ve been so angry to get it that hard. The tip was really purple. Furious. I saw his face later in the gym I had signed up for and it was a perfect match for that tight, angry, thrusting penis. He was bald and short and driven. I could see how driven he was by the weights he was putting on. Piling weight after weight on. Long after everyone else had given up. This little angry man in shorts.

I chose my photos carefully. My friend Julianne spent a whole evening helping me to decide. We did it all very methodically. I told her how I wanted to be perceived and we wrote buzzwords on a large sheet of paper.

Things like ‘intelligent’ ‘calm’ ‘poetry’ ‘skiing’.

We drank a bottle of prosecco as we went. Because you do, don’t you. That’s what girls do. Together. We laughed like fuck.

Then it got messy and Julianne said ‘I’m gonna do you. I’m gonna do the real you’.

And she did.

She wrote down ‘cunt’ ‘Jesus’ blender’ ‘angry’ and I stared at them. Suddenly sober and we realised it wasn’t that funny.

Because I think she got me then.

I think she actually got me.

So we filled in my profile like that.

And the things you get back.

That was the first time I started licking the cock shots.

I don’t know why.

I know it’s disgusting.

But it had been a long time.

Julianne had gone home of course.

And I got sent a really nice one.

You see I had got used to them by now.

I had got used to so much, so quickly.

There were arseholes and balls and there were people who would send pictures of themselves squeezing their balls so tightly together.

‘I want you to do this to me.’

There was cum on everything.

Cum on sheets, on coffee tables, on windscreens, bellies, nipples, magazines, tits, pieces of Lego, a sandpit at night. In Autumn a man had cum on a dead owl. A man had cum on his skis. A man had cum on his wife while she slept. A dog had cum on a man. A man had let his cum dribble down the stowed away table of an aeroplane seat.

Cum had become very normal to me.

And the licking like I said. I won’t go in to it. Except as to say I had to put my phone inside a zip lock.

Other ways to hide bags; Drink water. Exercise. Sleep better.

All the things it’s impossible to do when someone leaves you. It’s hard to look in a mirror now. It’s hard to look from the window and see everyone out there. ‘Hello’. (What you doing? Waving out a window. People think you’re nuts.)

You see he said ‘No. That was the night I went to get peanuts. Remember? Beer. Peanuts.’

And I doubted myself. Which was disgusting to me because I had been so sure. I had been so sure and this was me finally confronting him.

Which, for me, takes a lot.

So I had this great energy. This nervous great energy and I had let it out.

I let it out with this sort of bark. Like a bark, yawn, roar. Like a sort of stupid nervous girl with a stupid wobbly voice. I just didn’t want him to think I was attacking him. I wasn’t. I just wanted to know.

I wanted to know why I couldn’t sleep.

Why I would wake up in the middle of the night and wonder what the fuck had happened. Why wasn’t I baking sourdough? Why weren’t we having barbeques with friends and talking about a house. Or a garden. Or a bit more space. Or how it would be good to go out dancing again one day, then laugh secretly delighted that we never would. Or bi-fold doors.

Why was he always looking at his phone?

I had to have it out.

And then the peanuts. And the beer. And the memory of the night went blurry and maybe I did want peanuts. And maybe he had gone out and maybe I was just imagining it all. I can get like that sometimes. My mum. I’m not my mum. I’m not.

I was surprised to find myself sending cock shots too. I just took a screen grab and passed them on. Said very little. See what happened. It was amazing, the response.

I moved on to my own real body. In sections.

I’ve done my neck, my tits, my belly, my knees, my arsehole, my mouth, my lips, my hair, my fingers, my cunt, my throat, my arms. My eyes. I leave my necklace on. Because I know if he ever saw it he’d know it was me. The rest I do blank. No defining features. Like the way they do bodies on TV. Pale dead bodies from teenage girls. Washed up on a beach. That’s the look I go for.

Bags under my eyes.

It works.

It really works.

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Mr Glee

‘He’s a snivelling little bastard!’ exclaimed Mr Belcher. The other teachers had, by now, gathered around the table that stood at one end of the staffroom. Drawn by Mr Belchers’ agitation. He had come in, pouring with sweat, quite obviously distraught and covered in papers. He was always covered in papers. He held batches of them under his arms for just such an occasion. There weren’t many weeks went by when you didn’t modestly glance out the window, the dull tick of a school afternoon well under way, those few minutes entered in to when a class were entirely absorbed in their work, a silence fallen, when a casual glance from the window would see Mr Belcher flowing across the playground, a stream of loose leaf papers flying out behind him, taken by the wind to God knows where. Up in to trees and across deserted fields, to tremble against flaking goal posts or land in gardens and upon the windscreens of automobiles. Red in the face, the hair of his combover dislodged and flapping like the tail of some wild animal snagged on his scalp.

‘He called me a cunt.’

‘He did not. No such thing. Surely.’ Mr Bradley, the piglet-like little teacher of religious education said solicitously. His eyes blazing with delight. His mock outrage almost stopping him from speaking it seemed. Clutching his pearls, his mouth wide open as if to say ‘Yes. You must go on’.

‘He did. Oh, he’ll deny it. You mark my words. And he’s a clever little fucker too. Oh, he’ll deny it alright, but I heard. I heard him say the words.’

‘Was it more than the one word then Mr Belcher?’ Suzanne, always so dry, but prone to a few too many white wines in the Horse and Rafters on a Friday. She’d once told everyone she’d had a miscarriage in her kitchenette, blood pouring out through sponges, tea-towels, slippy on the tiles. It was a mucky business and that was a step too far. No, you enjoyed Suzanne, but you didn’t trust her.

‘He’s got that horrible little smile, hasn’t he? Like a little blade. A little flick knife. Looks you in the eye, those freckles, like butter wouldn’t melt and then there it is, that little smile and you know he’s got you in his sights.’

Mr Belcher was getting in to it now.

Down by the sink, the drying rack, the oversized tin of Nescafe, I wasn’t rushing. I had the teabag out of my mug by now, wrapped tightly round the teaspoon, drained dry against the inner edge of the cup so there would be no drips on the bin lid, then pushed the pedal with my foot. But the bin is uncontrollable. The lid, when you’re holding a hot cup of tea, is uncontrollable. With just a sandwich wrapper or a tissue, you can stop the lid with your hand, but not when you have a cup in one and a teaspoon with teabag wrapped round it in the other. The bin lid slammed so loudly against the wall behind I could’ve-

Well I couldn’t just-

They all see me now.

Mr Glee, down by the bins. Missing out.

But I wasn’t missing out. I was playing it cool. I had been observing from a distance. That would be all out of the window now. All they’d remember was the bin lid. The clatter. Clumsy Mr Glee.

The boy they were talking about was Ryan Spruce.

His father owned a large factory in town, so, of course, he was untouchable.

Spruce’s.

Makers of wholesale furniture and linens.

It was well known that Spruce’s had provided the Kennedys with their office chairs.

And there was a rumour they had made a double bed for the Obamas, but that seemed to be taking it a bit far. No, the firm had lost some of its glamour, but it was still an important business in this nothing town. And Ryan Spruce’s father was on the school council, so…

There we go.

That’s the way things were.

And no amount of whinging or complaining was going to get things changed.

No. Mr Belcher needed to put up or shut up.

‘What will you do?’ Miss Peckton asked. Innocent still. She had only been here a few months. She didn’t understand that wasn’t playing by the rules.

‘Well…’ Mr Belcher obviously embarrassed by the question.

‘Erm…’

‘Oh that doesn’t matter.’ Suzanne always quick to pick up the mood again when she sensed things had fallen. Good old Suzanne. You could rely on her for that. She had managed to bring the whole thing off back at the Christmas party after the headmaster had started sobbing.

When the whole thing looked like falling apart. She had brought it all off then.

‘Just tell us again what happened.’

‘Well…’

(It was like kick starting a car.)

‘Come on, Belcher’

‘Yes.

Of course.

Well…’

‘He called you a cunt.’

‘That was it! You see I’d simply asked the class to tell us something about their family. Their home. In Latin, of course. And the whole class had done it. Except for him and so…

Silence. The rest of the table looking away now.

‘What?’

‘Did you make him stand?’

‘Yes. Like I would any boy…child. Any child who hasn’t joined in. I take them and I make an example of them. I bring them to the front. I stare at them. I watch to see if a droplet of sweat springs up and then I turn to the rest of the class and I enjoin them to shame the child also.’

‘Ah.’

The others looking down. Away. Anywhere but Belcher.

‘What?’

‘What, for god’s sake?’

I could see no one was going to say. Even from my poor vantage point in the kitchenette I could see that. And maybe it was the tea spilling, or the bin lid fiasco, but it seemed like my last chance. I walked towards them. The group of them all round the embarrassed Mr Belcher, like so many bowling balls that had missed their mark and I said to him.

‘the boy was badly beaten as a child.

He was part of an experiment that went badly wrong.

He’s not allowed out on Saturdays.

He has learning difficulties and neuralgia.

He can’t be asked to stand up because it triggers his bones inside and that night he can barely sleep.

Do you understand?

He’s had rickets now for a long while.

He can’t do normal sums or be asked to talk politely.

He can’t walk down the corridor easily.

He suffers from backpain and terrible loss.

He has lonely moments that come across as aggression.

He’s lost all he knew. Is it any wonder he behaves that way?

He can barely string two words together some days, you know.

He has polio and smallpox resting inside him and it could come out any moment.

He’s a walking time bomb.

His parents are all gone now. They’ve disowned him.

He has no money.

He can’t be expected to look you in the eye.

For him that’s like looking a tiger in the eye.

He could be thinking that at any moment you’re going to pounce.

Is it any wonder he gets his claws in first?

Is it any wonder he did that to me?

Is it any wonder at all?

If I had known now what was going on inside I would’ve left well alone, but I didn’t.

I was stupid and ignorant and vain and you are too.

I could’ve made head.

But I didn’t.

Because of my own vain, stupid ignorance.

Because I have no one.

And nothing.

And he is gone.

That boy is gone.

It was a tremendous speech. I could see first surprise, then shame, then finally a sort of light enter the eyes of most of the others. It was a first-class speech. Where was it going? I had not known. Not earlier.

This must’ve been how Napoleon felt outside of Grenoble as he persuaded his men to once more follow him.

A pregnant silence filled the air.

Not knowing what to say. Quite how to cap it all I took a sip of the tea.

But, flushed with success, I mis-gulped. Burning hot liquid hit the roof of my mouth causing me to spit the whole lot across the assemblage.

Miss Peckton’s face crumpled as the tea spattered over her cheek and lips. The tea from another’s mouth. It hit her hardest, but the others were also affected.

They ducked, arms were thrown up. Trying to avoid the repulsive effusion from Mr Glee. Mr Glee who should’ve known better than to make himself seen.

Who dared to make a speech.

Who had even let him in?

Was it not bad enough they had to work with him.

This shadow.

This queen.

This foul stench upon the air.

Five years.

Is five years not long enough?

The silence?

No.

Never would be long enough.

Never. No. Not.

You dirty filthy cunt.

You filthy fucking bastard.

Stick your eyes with pins.

Pull you nails out.

Eat the dirt on the road.

Get ye gone from us.

It was Mr Bradley who stood. His chance.

Looking round at the others to check he was on the right side he looked me in the eye.

And suddenly he was no little pig.

Even Mr Bradley had the one up. The air of a God even.

“You’re still it.”