



Speaking with the Angel

TWELVE STORIES *by* TWELVE EXCITING
AND ORIGINAL WRITERS

'A stellar line-up' Guardian

Edited, and with an
Introduction by

Nick Hornby





Penguin

SPEAKING WITH THE ANGEL

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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Introduction

Soon after I had decided to ask some of the writers I knew and admired to contribute to this book, I read an interview with Bono in the *Guardian*, in which he talked about the Jubilee 2000 campaign, aimed at reducing the Third World's debt to the West. 'It's bigger than anything I will ever have anything to do with again as long as I live,' he said. 'So if I can open doors simply because I'm a celebrity, then I'll use that for all it's worth.' So far, his efforts have helped to remove \$100 billion from the tab.

The interview brought me up short. I'm not Bono, of course, and I suspect that it would be considerably harder for me to open the door of the Oval Office than it was for him, but even so ... Third World Debt! \$100 billion! TreeHouse, the charity to which you have just donated a pound (unless you've been sent a review copy, in which case you can send some money using the form at the back of this book), is a small – at the moment, a very small – school for severely autistic children, and one of its pupils is my son. Luckily, I don't have to justify myself to you, because all you've done is buy a book that you wanted to read, a book containing a dozen or so new stories by some of your favourite authors, and your donation was, I hope, incidental. But I certainly owe those authors an explanation, and so this introduction is aimed at them. You can read it if you like, but I don't mind if you skip it. You'll get your money's-worth anyway.

Perhaps I should begin by explaining that my son Danny won't benefit from *Speaking with the Angel*. (I've pinched the title, by the way, from Ron Sexsmith, whose first album contains a song of that name which seems to me to be heart-meltingly relevant.) Danny's fine, he's sorted – which is one of the reasons why I wanted to put this book together in the first place. He is, in many ways (and if one excludes the huge slice of ill-luck that befell him in the first place), a lucky little boy, and though I am in a financial position to ensure that his luck continues, I am not able to spread that luck around, not much as I would like to. Danny's good fortune is located in his attendance at TreeHouse, and, at the moment, very few autistic children are able to do the same. Indeed, very few autistic children are able to attend any school designed to meet their needs: there is a catastrophic underprovision of places in Britain. A TES survey in 1996 found that there were three thousand specialist places for seventy-six thousand kids, twenty-six thousand of whom were classed as severely autistic.

If you are a parent, then, your choices are unattractive. You can drive yourself mad by chasing after one of those three thousand places – a twenty-five-to-one shot, and almost certain to involve a move from one part of the country to another; or you can stick your child in a school that hasn't got a clue how to deal with him (he's probably male, your autistic child, for reasons that still remain obscure); you can keep him at home and wait, while the precious months and years slip by and you know that the research points to the urgency of early intervention. Over the last few years, distraught parents have begun to realize that the only response to all this is to found their own school.

One could put a kind of let's-do-the-show-here spin on this, and make out that founding your own school is fun, and self-improving, and so on, but of course it's not any of these things, as you probably suspected. It's a Kafkaesque nightmare of blackly comical bureaucratic buck-passing, and frantic worry. The parents who set up TreeHouse have done so with minimal help from local authorities – even though some of these local authorities now recognize the school as the best and indeed only

alternative for their autistic children – and with no public assistance. (England’s hopeless and ill-advised bid for the 2006 World Cup was eligible for Lottery money, for example, whereas TreeHouse was not.) Danny’s school is now firmly established, but it needs permanent premises, and it needs to grow; we have a waiting list, and a duty to educate as many kids as possible.

And how do you educate severely autistic children? How do you teach those who, for the most part have no language, and no particular compulsion to acquire it, who are born without the need to explore the world, who would rather spin round and round in a circle, or do the same jigsaw over and over again, than play games with their peers, who won’t make eye-contact, or copy, and who fight bitterly (and sometimes literally, with nails and teeth and small fists) for the right to remain sealed in their own world? The answer is that you teach them everything, and the absolute necessity of this first-principles approach makes all other forms of education, the approaches that involve reading and writing and all that, look quite frivolous. Danny has to be shown how to copy, how to look, how to make word-shapes with his mouth, how to play with toys, how to draw, how to have fun, how to live and be, effectively, and TreeHouse utilizes a system that makes these elementary skills possible. Danny’s education began with him learning how to bang on a table when prompted to do so, a skill that took him weeks to master. (Table-banging is not a part of the national curriculum, and sometimes debates about what the rest of the nation’s young should study can seem to me preposterously refined.) What’s the point of that? The point of that is hidden in the phrase ‘when prompted to do so’ only when a way has been found to penetrate the autistic’s world can any progress be made, and now Danny listens. He can’t understand everything he hears, but at least there is now a sense that for some parts of the day – and for most of the school day – he occupies the same world as his teachers and his peers.

And he loves his schoolwork. He loves being set small and achievable tasks – to begin with, tasks like touching his nose or sitting down, and then, as he became better attuned to what was required of him, more complicated commands – and he loves the praise (and the crisps and biscuits) that accompany his accomplishments. And my guess is that he is grateful for these assaults on his insularity. He doesn’t want to live the life that he would choose if left to his own devices, with its endless repetitions and routines and patterns – he wants and needs someone to come along and stop him from watching *Postman Pat and the Tuba* for the one thousandth time, or from doing the same simple jigsaw puzzle fifteen times in an hour (these figures are approximate, of course, but they are not exaggerated). And his mother and father want someone to come along and stop that, too. All parents of autistic children know the terrible cycle of guilt and apathy that comes with the territory: our kids are capable of entertaining themselves for hours at a time if we let them (and sometimes we do, because we’re tired, and maybe despondent), but we know that the entertainment of choice – spinning round and round, lining things up, watching the same videos over and over again – is not healthy or productive. But few of us have the energy to do what Danny’s teachers do. We cannot create scores of different activities each and every day, all of them designed to equip our children to cope better with the lives they are living now, and will live in the future.

TreeHouse is unique: its children receive an education unlike anything else that is offered in the UK, which is why those of us involved with the school are so passionate, so evangelical about it. We want TreeHouse to become bigger, and we want other schools like TreeHouse to start sprouting up all

over the country, and the only way that's going to happen is if some of us start shouting. I'm not much of a shouter by nature, but *Speaking with the Angel* is my way of at least raising my voice. I can see that what is being provided for the majority of these seventy-six thousand children is hopelessly inadequate, and I want to give other parents the same opportunities that Danny has had – or at least help to create a climate wherein these opportunities are regarded as important.

This probably sounds like a bland if laudable desire, and if so then I have failed properly to describe the difference a school like TreeHouse can make, so let me put it this way. Somewhere in London – somewhere everywhere, but TreeHouse is in London, so that is the place I'd like you to locate this vision – there is a child who slept for maybe five or six hours last night. (He sleeps five or six hours every night, in fact, which means that if he can be kept awake until, say, nine, then he will wake up at two or three.) He is upset and frustrated, so he screams, and his parents, who have maybe slept for three or four hours, feel a mixture of exhaustion and depression and panic – they live in a small flat, and the walls are thin, and they know that they are not the only ones who are disturbed on a nightly basis. It is six hours until one of them starts work (the other would like to work, but in the absence of any suitable school place for the child, it is not possible), by which time the child will have attempted to hurt himself by hitting himself hard and repeatedly on the head, and maybe thrown some food around, and refused to use the toilet and ended up soiling a carpet, and demanded in the only language he has at his disposal (one word, repeated with increasing force and volume) to go out to the park, even though it's pitch black outside ... and then daylight comes, and because the local authorities don't as yet have a suitable school place for your child (although they're working on it, they promise and even right now they are having meetings about possibly starting up a school which may well be open by the time your child is seven or eight or ten), then you're looking at another ten or twelve or fifteen hours of the same thing, alleviated only by the prospect of the child falling asleep – sleep he shouldn't really be having, because it will make things worse the next night, but it's your only time off in the whole day. And there's nowhere to go, and no one to complain to, and there's no money in the bank that can be used to buy some respite care, because you're down to one income anyway ...

And of course, *of course*, there are other charities, and other problems, some of them worse than this, if such things can be quantified in that way, and other autistic organizations that would kill for the money that this book is going to raise. But I can't worry about any of that. All I can say is that this book will change a family's life for the better – a real, specific family, a family currently living the life described above, and if you want, you can write to me c/o Penguin Books and I'll write back with the name of that family. As a result of *Speaking with the Angel*, TreeHouse will be able to expand, which means that there will be a couple of extra places for children living precisely the kinds of lives outlined above. And because the teachers there know what they are doing, and have at their disposal ways to make these children happier, more expressive, more confident, less frustrated, then the awful worry and exhaustion of bringing up an autistic child will be made a lot easier for a few lucky parents. Oh, I know it's not much. But nothing's much, if you look at it like that, and all that any of us who care about autistic kids can do for the time being is to try to carve a few school places out of nowhere.

My son has a friend now, a little boy in his class called Toby, whom he loves, and enjoys seeing and spending time with. There are some autistic kids who get no particular pleasure out of seeing or being with their parents, so a friendship of this kind is remarkable, unexpected, a constant joy to those who

witness it. And he's generally calmer, especially in social situations, and he's beginning to play with his toys, and he's finally learning how to use a toilet ... None of this would have happened if he hadn't been able to attend this one, particular, special school. So, Robert, Melissa, Giles, Patrick, Colin, Zadie, Dave, Helen, Roddy, Irvine, John: thank you, and I hope this introduction helps you to understand just how much you have done. As for the rest of you: like I said, I'm hoping that you'll feel you've done nothing charitable whatsoever, so never mind all this. Turn the page and get on with the book.

Nick Hornby, 2000

ROBERT HARRIS

PRIME MINISTER: With your permission Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement to the House regarding certain incidents of a personal nature. Some of these incidents have, in the past few days, entered the public domain in a lurid and garbled form, and a number of my ministerial colleagues have urged me to take the first available opportunity to set the record straight. This, with the indulgence of the House I now propose to do.

Incident at the Greenford Park Service Station

At approximately five o'clock last Friday afternoon I left No. 10 Downing Street as usual to travel to the Prime Minister's official country residence at Chequers for the weekend. The party consisted of two cars. The advance car contained myself, a duty secretary from the Downing Street staff, a driver, and a protection officer from the Metropolitan Police. The back-up vehicle contained three additional protection officers.

For several years it has been my practice to take advantage of long car journeys as an opportunity to work. Among the documents which had been prepared for my attention on this occasion was the weekly digest of press coverage compiled for me by my Chief Press Secretary.

I have arranged for a copy of this document, which carries no security restriction, to be placed in the Library of the House. Honourable Members who consult it will see that it conveys frankly, and with detailed quotation, the whole spectrum of press comment about myself as it had appeared in the previous week's newspapers. The comment was, as usual, robust; some might say robust in the extreme. However, I have always taken the view that a free press is an essential element of a free society, and that, if you are in public life, you must, as Kipling has it,

'... bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools ...'

The route taken to Chequers is frequently varied for security reasons, and it is not official policy to disclose it. Therefore I shall not do so now. Suffice it to say that the traffic heading west out of London on this particular evening was unusually heavy, even for a wet Friday evening in the pre-Christmas period, and that, after an hour of travelling, we had managed to proceed only as far along the A40 as the Greenford Roundabout, a distance of some seven miles.

It was at this point – that is, at approximately 6 p.m. – that I began to feel unwell. The principal symptom was one of acute nausea, brought on, no doubt, by the effort of trying to read in a car which was repeatedly stopping and starting. I needed fresh air. Unfortunately, for security reasons, the windows of my official car are not designed to open. I put aside the press digest and directed my protection officers to pull in to the next available service station, informing them that I needed to use the lavatory. This request was radioed to the back-up car and a few moments later we turned off the A40 on to the forecourt of what I now know to be the Greenford Park Service Station.

I must emphasize that the responsibility for what followed is mine, and mine alone. No blame

should be attached to my protection officers, who behaved throughout in their usual exemplary and professional manner. Having checked that the gentleman's lavatory was unoccupied, and having secured the area immediately in front of it, it was on my express orders that they remained outside whilst I went inside, locking the door behind me. Nobody else was present.

Several newspapers have described what followed as a 'moment of madness'. It would be more accurate, Mr Speaker, to describe it as a series of small but logical steps, whose cumulative effect was to prove fateful. On entering the cubicle I noticed that behind the lavatory basin was a window. This window was slightly open. By standing on the lavatory seat, I discovered that it was possible to open the window fully. I was thus able to bring my face into contact with some much-needed air. Only then did it occur to me that the aperture was, in fact, just large enough for the insertion of my head and shoulders. As the air was having a beneficial effect, this prospect seemed appealing. Unfortunately I then made what was to prove a regrettable miscalculation with regard to my centre of gravity. Questions have been asked about the failure of my protection officers to hear the noise of my exit via the window, but I can assure the House that the roar of the nearby traffic on the wet road was more than sufficient to drown out any sound I may have made.

I left the lavatory in a head-first position and it was this, rather than any subsequent event – and contrary to reports in the media – that produced the slight bruising and abrasions still visible on my face and hands.

It may be that I was rendered temporarily unconscious by my descent. I cannot recall. If I was, it was certainly only for a few moments. Upon rising to my feet, I found myself in a small area, enclosed by walls on three sides. To my left was a gap leading to an automatic car-washing machine. Honourable members will understand that, given the time of year, it was now quite dark. I had also lost a contact lens. Finding the space in which I was standing claustrophobic, and feeling slightly groggy from the effects of my fall, I ventured out along the side of the car wash. As the various diagrams printed in the press have shown, I was now invisible from the forecourt, and it was this route which, as chance would have it, led me away from the garage and out on to a neighbouring street.

I have learned subsequently that my protection officers waited two or three minutes before first knocking on the lavatory door and then, on receiving no reply, breaking it down. By then, however, I was several hundred yards to the south. There was, I repeat, nothing they could have done, and no blame attaches to them in this regard.

Telephone Call to No. 10

At this stage of the evening, as I am sure the House will appreciate, I had no particular plan in mind. It may well be that I was slightly concussed. At any event, I was content simply to follow my footsteps where they led me, enjoying the refreshing sensation of the damp night air. Ferrymead Gardens took me to Millet Road which gave on to Beechwood Avenue and later Melrose Close – street names which, more eloquently than I can hope to do, describe the peaceful English suburb in which I found myself. I felt no sensation of danger; rather the reverse.

I am aware that my actions have since been described in the media as 'a gross dereliction of duty' (*Daily Telegraph*) and 'an unprecedented endangering of national security' (*The Times*). Yet, as the noble lord, Lord Jenkins, has pointed out (in today's *Evening Standard*), there is an historical

precedent. On the night of 4 May 1915, Herbert Asquith walked from Mansfield Street, near Oxford Circus, to Downing Street, lost in thought about his feelings for Miss Venetia Stanley, who had just disclosed to him her intention of marrying one of his Cabinet colleagues. If one Prime Minister can walk the London streets unprotected during wartime, why cannot another do the same in peacetime? Does a Prime Minister not enjoy the same civil liberties as any other citizen of the United Kingdom? These are questions which the House may wish to ponder.

Of course, I was aware of the undoubted anxiety which I was by now causing to those who were concerned for my welfare. Accordingly, I took steps to reassure them. The duty log of the No. 10 switchboard records that at 6.27 p.m. a caller claiming to be the Prime Minister attempted to make a reverse charge call to the Downing Street Press Office from a public telephone box in Greenford. The same caller tried again two minutes later. On this second occasion I was finally able to convince the switchboard operator of my identity, and my call was put through. The House will thus see that within approximately twenty minutes of my alleged disappearance, my office was aware that I was safe and well and acting of my own free will. So much for the so-called 'night of frantic worry' (*Daily Mail*) to which I am supposed to have subjected them.

My Chief Press Secretary, with characteristic presence of mind, took a careful note of our conversation, and I have arranged for a copy of his record also to be placed in the Library of the House. According to this note, I told him not to worry about me, and reassured him that in due course I would return to Downing Street of my own volition. He frankly disapproved of this plan. He believed my actions would quickly become public and provoke damaging speculation in the media. He urged me in strong terms to stay where I was, adding that he would arrange for my protection officers to pick me up: they were, he informed me, at that very moment patrolling the neighbourhood looking for me. The duty log shows that I terminated this conversation at 7.01 p.m.

It was raining quite steadily by now, the streets were quiet, and the realization was suddenly born upon me that unless I took swift and decisive action to vacate the area, I was likely to face the embarrassing situation of being apprehended by my own security officers. Irrational as it may seem with hindsight, I was seized with a powerful desire to postpone such an encounter, at least for a little while longer. But how was it to be avoided? A taxi, if one could be procured, was the obvious solution. But now I faced a further, and unanticipated, problem.

The House may be aware that the first thing a Prime Minister loses on taking office is his passport which is removed from him by his Private Office to ease his official travel arrangements. The second thing to go is his ready money. Why, after all, does a Prime Minister need cash? How would he spend it if he had it? Where would he obtain it if he wanted it? The sudden realization that I had no money placed me in a quandary.

It was then that I noticed that the telephone call box in which I was sheltering stood adjacent to a small row of commercial premises. Among them was a branch of my own bank. I had retained my personal cheque card from my days as Leader of the Opposition, and it was the work of but a few moments to hurry across the pavement and insert it into the automatic telling machine (ATM). However, my relief quickly evaporated when I realized I had only a vague recollection of my personal identification number (PIN). On my third attempt to enter my PIN, the ATM informed me that it had retained my card.

My reason for giving the House these apparently minor details is to make it easier to comprehend the sequence of events which followed. I was wearing only a light business suit. I was thoroughly wet. I was cold. I was eager to be on my way. The only object on me, I realized, which had any monetary value, was an inscribed wristwatch, given to me during the last G8 summit by the President of the United States.

The sequence of events by which this wristwatch came to be in the possession of a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl has also excited considerable media speculation, most of it of an utterly fantastical nature. The facts are more prosaic.

‘Miss B’

As luck would have it, no taxis were available to hire in that particular part of Greenford at that time of the evening, either for cash or barter. Venturing into the road, I therefore attempted to flag down a passing motorist. Perhaps not surprisingly, the spectacle of a man bearing a striking resemblance to the Prime Minister, bleeding slightly from a grazed forehead, looming out of the darkness on a rainy Friday night with his suit jacket held over his head, caused him to panic. Far from slowing down, he accelerated away, a pattern of behaviour repeated by several other motorists as I made my way up and down the centre of Ferrymead Avenue in search of assistance.

It was at this point that I became aware of another pedestrian on that stretch of road – a pedestrian bending, as it seemed to me, to unlock the door of a parked car. This other person – a female person – who, because of her age, cannot be named for legal reasons – is the person who has since become known in the media as ‘Miss B’.

I cannot, at this stage, remember precisely which of us initiated the conversation that now took place. It may be that Miss B, as I shall also call her, hailed me in a jocular spirit, or I may have approached her. It is not, in any case, a relevant detail. I naturally assumed her to be the owner of the vehicle beside which she was standing, or at any rate a person authorized by the owner of the vehicle to drive that vehicle away, or, at the very least, the holder of a current UK driver’s licence. I also accepted at face value her explanation that the vehicle was mechanically defective, and therefore needed to be started by the unorthodox procedure of opening the bonnet and connecting certain cables in the ignition, a technique which, my right honourable friend the Home Secretary informs me, is known as ‘hot-wiring’.

Some will no doubt accuse me of naivety in this matter. That is for the House and the country to judge. The essence of the situation is that I asked a person whom I assumed to be a competent driver to give me a lift, that she at first demurred, that I then offered her as payment the wristwatch to which I made reference earlier, and that she then agreed to drive me wherever I wished to go. The whole case is now in the hands of the Crown Prosecution Service and I am advised that it would be prejudicial for me to comment further on a situation where legal action may be pending.

It was, I should estimate, approximately 7.20 p.m. when, with Miss B at the wheel, we pulled out of Ferrymead Avenue at the start of what was to prove an eventful journey. By this time, unknown to me, British Telecom engineers had pin-pointed the precise location of the telephone box from which I had contacted the Downing Street Press Office, my Principal Private Secretary had been alerted, and the Head of Special Branch and the Director-General of the Security Service, in consultation with the

Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, had issued orders for the area to be sealed off. The emergency services had responded immediately with their usual superb professionalism. The stations of Greenford, South Greenford, Drayton Green and Hanwell had all been closed, and a rudimentary vehicle checkpoint (VCP) was already in operation, blocking access from Oldfield Lane South to the Greenford Roundabout.

It was towards this VCP that Miss B now accelerated.

Journey into London

My precise recollection of what followed is hazy. According to Miss B, as quoted in yesterday's *News of the World*, I shouted 'Go, go, go.' I believe, in fact, that my actual words were 'No, no, no' and that in the heat of the moment, she misheard me. The truth may never be known. What is not in dispute is that an offence was now committed under the provisions of the 1972 Road Traffic Act, in that our vehicle failed to stop when requested to do so by a police officer. I deeply regret this.

In her account of the night's events, as related in the *News of the World*, Miss B asserts that she had no idea that I was the Prime Minister. I believe this to be true. She certainly did not seem to me to be the kind of young person who would follow political events at all closely. When I told her who I was, and that the wristwatch which she was now wearing had been given to me by the President of the United States, she responded with an exclamation of frank disbelief.

I am aware that I have been widely criticized for failing to recognize that she was of school age. It was, however, as I have pointed out, dark; I may well have been suffering the effects of concussion; I had lost a contact lens; and the photographs of Miss B reproduced in the *News of the World* – even with her face masked to protect her identity – show, as I am sure the House would agree, a person of unusually mature appearance.

Her driving skills were also those of a person many years in advance of her true age. The noise of pursuit soon died away and we found ourselves on the A40 heading east, back towards central London – the very road along which I had been travelling to Chequers a bare ninety minutes before.

Honourable Members may perhaps imagine the thoughts which were running through my mind. I was beginning to see that my actions could indeed be open to widespread misinterpretation, as my Chief Press Officer had warned me they would be. It was now clear that a considerable police operation was underway in the Greenford area. I had obviously inconvenienced many people. Given the numbers involved, there was little chance of what had happened not becoming public at some stage. I needed to think quickly what I should do. Miss B took the view, and expressed it forcibly, that continuing on our present course along the A40 would foreshorten that thinking time considerably. I concurred. Accordingly, we left the A40 at the Hanger Lane interchange and joined the North Circular Road.

Perhaps I might now quote to the House from Miss B's account in the *News of the World*:

'I said to him, "Are you really the Prime Minister?" He said he was. He seemed like a nice bloke. He'd gone very quiet. He said he was worried he was going to get me in to a lot of trouble. He said the papers were going to come after me. I said, "No way. You're kidding me." He said, "You've no idea what they're like."

'He asked if I lived with someone who would look after me? Did I have a husband? I said no way: my dad was inside and my mum had done a runner and I lived with my gran. He said, "So how old are you then? Eighteen? Nineteen?" I said, "Fifteen", and he kind of groaned and went very quiet again. I thought I'd turn on the radio to cheer him up.'

Mr Speaker, it has been asked – and fairly asked – why, at this stage of the evening, I did not simply direct Miss B to pull off the road, and await the inevitable arrival of the police. With hindsight, of course, this is what I should have done. I was in a vehicle clearly being driven by someone not qualified to do so. But my situation at the time appeared to me more complicated. Miss B has been kind enough to indicate, via the *News of the World*, that I seemed like ‘a nice bloke’. May I, across the havoc of the past few days, return the compliment, and say that she seemed a nice young woman?

And there was something more. In the drama of the preceding minutes, a bond had sprung up between us – a purely platonic bond, I hasten to add – but a bond nonetheless, which meant that I now felt acutely responsible for the situation in which I had placed her. I knew only too well what was likely to happen to her, a vulnerable schoolgirl, if her part in the night’s events became known to the media. Could some means be found of extricating her from this sorry tangle? Our best hope was surely to remove ourselves as far as possible from the scene of police operations, and it was for this reason, as much as any other, that we continued our journey across London, eventually leaving the North Circular Road at the Brent Cross Shopping Centre, and travelling south down North End Road toward the borough of Hampstead.

‘Mr A’

I have quoted Miss B as telling the *News of the World* that it was her idea to switch on the car radio. I was frankly curious to know whether any word of the night’s dramas had yet reached the media. As it happened, the owner of the vehicle – to whom I have since written a letter of apology – had left the radio tuned to a news station, and immediately I found myself listening to an interview regarding my recent performance as Prime Minister. The House will perhaps understand if I say that I felt a sudden sensation of dread. My political life, if not exactly passing before my eyes, seemed at any rate to be passing rapidly before my ears. However, as the broadcast continued, I realized that the interview, which was part of a regular political programme, had in fact been pre-recorded. The tone of the comments being broadcast was one of characteristically lofty abuse and I recognized at once the voice of the speaker: a columnist whom I knew personally, and whose work appears regularly in a number of publications, among them the *Guardian* and the *Observer*. His name will be familiar to members on both sides of the House. For legal reasons, I shall call him Mr A.

Honourable members who take the trouble to consult the weekly press summary which I have had placed in the Library will see that it contains several quotations from Mr A’s recent journalism. By a curious coincidence, I had been re-reading these quotations earlier in the evening, at around the moment when I was stricken with nausea. In the *Guardian*, for example, he had written:

‘The Prime Minister is, by common consent, a little man: “a pettyfogging political pygmy”, was how one of his Cabinet colleagues described him at a private meeting last week. The gap between his personal qualities and the importance of the office he holds grows daily ever more embarrassingly apparent.’

And in the *Observer*:

‘It should surprise no one to learn that the Prime Minister is a liar. Lying, after all, is the essence of the politician’s craft. What should surprise us – and what alarms his colleagues – is that he is such a bad liar. He is a true phoney: an authentic fraud. As one senior Cabinet Minister recently remarked: “He’s the sort of man who, if he kept a brothel, would bring prostitution into disrepute.” ’

There is more in a similar vein, but perhaps the House will excuse me if I confine myself to these two fairly typical illustrations.

As I said at the outset of my statement, I have always believed strongly in the tradition of robust press comment as an essential part of our democratic system. I have nothing against journalists as such. Far from it. I had seen Mr A socially on a number of occasions, both before and after I became Prime Minister. I had been to his house. He had been to mine. He had sent me his books when they were published. I had presented his recent award at the annual *What the Papers Say* lunch when he was made Columnist of the Year. I had always made efforts to be friendly towards him. His position in the political spectrum was roughly the same as mine. He should have been, if not a friend, then at least an ally. Yet in print, for reasons I had never understood, he adopted a stance of unwavering criticism. I return to the account given by Miss B:

‘This posh guy on the radio was really slagging him off, so I said something like, “Sounds like this f***er really hates your guts.” And he said, “Yes, but he’s always very nice to my face.” So I said, “You mean to tell me you know the guy?” And he said, yes he did, that he used to see him a bit. And I said, “Well, it’s none of my business, but don’t you think he’s due a sorting, the way he’s going on?” And he looked out of the window and he thought about it for a bit, and then he said that funnily enough the f***er lives somewhere around here.’

Incident in Hampstead

In deciding to visit Mr A at his home I was aware that I was embarking on a potentially hazardous course. On the other hand, I took the view that I was by this stage

‘... in blood
Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o’er.’

By which I do not mean to imply that I consciously intended to do Mr A any actual physical injury, but rather that I had by now concluded that my recent actions would, regardless of what I did, become public knowledge very soon. Once that happened, it did not require much effort on my part to imagine what Mr A himself would have to say about my conduct. The prospect of for once seizing the initiative – of, to use Miss B’s phrase, giving him ‘a sorting’, whatever that may mean – held a certain undeniable appeal.

As I have already told the House, our route from Greenford had now carried us as far as Hampstead, the district in which Mr A has for many years lived. I know the area well. As a backbench MP, I had lived around the corner from Mr A in a basement flat. His own, substantial, four-storey house was familiar to me, and I directed Miss B to the appropriate street. For a moment, after we had parked outside, I hesitated. Was this, on reflection, really a sensible course? But then I resolved that I would continue. The media, after all, had frequently turned up uninvited on my doorstep over the years. Why should I not do the same to one of them? I left the car and rang the bell. Mr A himself answered the door.

Mr Speaker, I cannot claim to have the events of the next few minutes arranged with perfect forensic clarity in my mind. I recall that Mr A greeted me with his usual civility, and that he was carrying a bottle of champagne and a half-full glass. He did not seem particularly pleased to see me. He was, he said, expecting dinner guests at any moment, and made a general indication of regret that

he was therefore unable to invite me in. Perhaps, he suggested, my office could contact his secretary and we could arrange a suitable date for an appointment the following week.

It was at this point that Miss B left the car and joined me on the doorstep. Her appearance on the scene seemed to affect Mr A's composure. She began quoting back to him several of the points he had been making earlier on the radio, and invited him to step over the threshold and repeat them. He seemed both confused and alarmed by her presence. I explained that she had recently come to work at No. 10 as part of a work experience scheme. This statement, which was part of my continuing efforts to protect her identity, was misleading, and I regret it. He finally agreed to admit us, and asked us to go upstairs and wait for him in his study, while he made arrangements, he said, for one of his domestic staff to greet his guests in his place.

The suggestion in various newspapers that, once in his study, I 'ransacked' his desk is absurd. The truth is that the room was relatively small and it was almost impossible for me to avoid glancing at his computer screen and seeing what was written there – namely, his column for that Sunday's issue of the *Observer*. It included the following passage:

'Unable, it seems, to tolerate even the mildest criticism, the Prime Minister is said by close colleagues to be exhibiting worrying signs of mental instability. "All Prime Ministers go mad eventually," one of his senior Cabinet colleagues told me privately last week. "The difference is that this one was mad from the start."'

I was still reading when Mr A entered the room.

I now proceeded to make a number of points, of which perhaps four stand out in my memory: first, that it was a pity, given his obvious genius for public administration, that he had never seen fit to offer himself for election; secondly, that it was richly ironic for a journalist, of all people, to accuse all politicians of habitually lying, as I had yet to read any article in any newspaper on any subject of which I had any knowledge that didn't contain at least one factual inaccuracy; thirdly, that I considered it morally contemptible of him to quote anonymous so-called 'senior colleagues' who, I was sure, had better things to do than pass the time of day with him; and, fourthly, that if I was mad – and I was beginning to suspect that I might be, for choosing to be a Prime Minister when I could have been a newspaper columnist – then I had surely been driven mad by him, and by people like him.

Mr A responded that he had, indeed, considered a political career during his time at Oxford, but had concluded that real power no longer resided in this House, which was full – I believe I am quoting him correctly – of 'little people'; secondly, that he had no views as to the respective merits of journalism and politics, except to observe that nowadays the former offered better rewards, in every sense, and therefore attracted individuals of greater talent; thirdly, that no journalist ever reveals his sources; and finally that he had no particular animus against me personally, but took the impartial view that all politicians were mad and liars, and therefore that whoever was Prime Minister at any given time was by definition, likely to be the biggest and maddest liar of the lot.

I am not sure precisely how long this conversation lasted. As the House will recall, I no longer had a watch. Nor can I say for certain when I first realized that Mr A was deliberately keeping me occupied. But I should say that roughly twenty minutes had elapsed when Miss B, who had taken up a position by the window, suddenly interrupted our discussion to report that the street below was filling with policemen and photographers. It was then that Mr A disclosed that he had misled us. He had not, in fact, left us alone in order to speak to one of his staff, but rather to alert the picture desk of a national

newspaper.

The House will appreciate that, until the Crown Prosecution Service has decided whether or not to initiate criminal proceedings, I am not at liberty to describe as fully as I would wish to do exactly what happened next. No party has yet been charged with a criminal offence, and unless and until that happens, Mr A has a right to anonymity. Miss B's published account is, frankly, incoherent. What is not in dispute is that witnesses heard voices raised, and that at some point Mr A and myself both fell, entwined, down the stairs, landing in the hall at exactly the moment when, as luck would have it, the front door opened to admit the first of Mr A's dinner guests, my right honourable friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Conclusion

Mr Speaker, I have tried to set out the facts as clearly and unemotionally as possible. Someone – I think it may have been Abraham Lincoln, or possibly it was Winston Churchill – once wrote that a night in a police cell is good for any man, and I feel that I have personally benefited from this experience. I have been treated as any other citizen would have been under the circumstances, and that is all I have ever sought.

To have been allowed to serve this country has been a great privilege. Over the course of the next few hours, I shall be having further discussions with my ministerial colleagues and others, and later this evening I hope to have an audience of Her Majesty the Queen. After that my own personal position will be clearer.

No doubt much more will be said on these matters in the days and weeks to come. In the meantime it only remains for me to thank you, Mr Speaker, and through you the House, for the courtesy you have shown in listening to my personal statement.

The Wonder Spot

MELISSA BANK

Seth talks me into going to a party in Brooklyn. He says that we can just drop by. I tell him that a party in Brooklyn is a commitment. It takes effort. It's like a wedding: You can't just drop by.

'We can just drop by,' he says again, in a tone that says, *We can do anything we want.*

This will be our first party as a couple.

He says, 'It'll be fun.'

My boyfriend is a decade younger than I am; he is full of hope.

We drive to Brooklyn in his old Mustang convertible, with the top down. Because of the wind and because I'm on the side of Seth's bad ear, we can't really talk – or I can't. But he tells me that we're going to Williamsburg, the section of Brooklyn that's been called the New Downtown. After the party we can walk around and have dinner at a restaurant his friend Bob is about to open there. Bob has offered to let us try everything on the menu-to-be if we'll help him name the restaurant; the finalists are The Shiny Diner, Bob's and The Wonder Spot. 'Start thinking,' Seth says, and I do.

Across the bridge and into the land of Brooklyn, we go under overpasses and down streets so dark and deserted you know they're used only to get lost on. I get this pang for Manhattan, where I am never farther than a block from a bodega, never more than a raised arm from a cab. But then we turn corner and – lights! people! action! – we park.

Walking to the party, I tell Seth about the Williamsburg I've already been to, the one in Virginia. I expect him to have heard of it – he's from Canada and knows more about the US than I do – but he hasn't. I tell him that I was five or six at the time, and I didn't understand the concept of historical re-enactment. I thought that we'd just found a place where women in bonnets churned butter and men in breeches shoed horses. I tell him the real drama of the trip: I lost the dollar my father had given me for the gift shop.

'What period do they re-enact?' Seth says, teasing.

'You know,' I say, 'colonial times.'

'When was that exactly?'

'Sometime before 1910,' I say.

I'm having such a good time that I forget about the party until we're on the elevator up. I say, 'Maybe we should have a code for "I want to go."'

He starts to make a joke but sees that I'm serious and squeezes my hand three times. I OK the code.

The elevator door opens right into the loft. I was counting on those extra few seconds of hallway before facing the party, the party we are now part of and in, a party with people talking and laughing and having a party time. I think, *I am a solid, trying to do a liquid's job.*

I am only a third joking when I squeeze Seth's hand three times. He squeezes back four, and before I can ask what four means, our hostess is upon us. She is tall and slinky, with ultra-short hair and a gold dot in one of her perfect nostrils; I feel every pound of my weight, every year of my age, until Seth tells her, 'This is my girlfriend, Meg.'

I'm not sure I've ever had a boyfriend who introduced me as his girlfriend. I smile up at this

ghostly-pale sweetie-pie man o' mine.

As soon as our hostess slinks off to greet her next arrivals, I say, 'What does four mean?'

'It means, "I love you, too," ' he says.

I want to be happy to hear these words – it's the first time we've squeezed them – but I feel so close to him at this moment, I say the truth, which is, 'I feel old.'

He puts his coat around my shoulders and says, 'Is that better?' and I realize that I've spoken into his bad ear.

I nod, and we move deeper into the party. He introduces me as his girlfriend to each of the friends we pass, all of whom seem happy to meet me, and I think, *I am his girlfriend, Meg; I am girlfriend; I am Meg, girlfriend of Seth.*

I'm fine, even super-fine, until he goes to get a glass of wine for me. Now I look around, trying to pretend, as I always do at parties, that I could be talking to a fellow party-goer if I wanted to, but at the moment I am just too captivated by my own fascinating observations of the crowd.

The women are young, young, young, liquidy and sweet-looking; they are batter, and I am the sponge cake they don't know they'll become. I stand here, a lone loaf, stuck to the pan.

It is at this moment that I see Vincent – only from behind, but I know it's him. Vincent is my ex-boyfriend, or X7, if you count all the times we broke up and got back together.

I've told Seth almost nothing about my ex-boyfriends. Now he'll meet the one who told me my head was too big for my body.

When Seth returns with my wine, he says, 'Still cold?' and he rubs my shoulders and arms and back warm. 'Better?' he says.

I do feel better, and I say so.

A small crowd gathers around us – the drummer in Seth's band, and his entourage – girlfriend, brother, and girlfriend of brother. They try to talk to me, and I try to talk back. One of the girlfriends I'm not sure whose, works in public radio. Since I'm a public-radio lover, I can keep this conversation going, program to program, until she asks me what I do.

I say, 'I'm a weaver,' and both girlfriends look at me like they're not sure they've heard correctly.

'I weave,' I say, and this leads to an almost post-nuclear silence, the usual effect.

But the one who works in public radio says, 'Do you like weaving?'

'Except for the stress,' I say. She laughs, and we are insta-friends.

Then we girlfriends return to their boyfriends. I plant myself beside Seth like a fire hydrant, my back to where I imagine Vincent to be.

But he's not; he's right across the room, his arm slung like a belt around the hips of a girl who I can tell right away is a model. She has the long, straight hair I used to wish for and sky-high thighs you can see through her mesh stockings.

Just like the bad old days, Vincent doesn't seem to recognize me. Then he gives me a look of mock shock.

I inadvertently squeeze Seth's hand, and he smiles without looking at me, like we have a secret language, and I wish we did.

I watch Vincent steer his girlfriend toward us.

He's grown his hair long and now sports a weird beard and mustache, Lucifer-style. Plus, he's

wearing a shirt with huge pointy collars jutting out like fangs over his jacket.

When he reaches us, I say, 'Happy Hallowe'en.'

'Hello, Meg,' he says, Dr Droll.

I say, 'Seth, this is –'

Vincent interrupts and introduces himself as 'Enzo'.

'Enzo?' I say.

He doesn't answer, and I remember his New Jersey friends calling him Vinnie, and his firm correction: 'Vincent'.

He pulls his model front and center and says, 'This is Amanda.'

'I'm Meg,' I say to her. Then I get to say, 'This is my boyfriend, Seth.'

'Hi.' She is both chirpy and cool, an ice chick. 'We know each other,' she says about the man I've just introduced as my boyfriend, and she kisses him – just his cheek, but so far back that her pouty mouth appears to be traveling neck- or ear-ward.

I stare at her, even while I am telling myself not to. I fall under the spell not of her eyes but her eyebrows, which are perfectly arched and skinny and make me aware of my own thick and feral pair; mine are a forest and hers are a trail.

When I blink myself out of my trance, Vincent is saying, 'Whenever anyone would say, "Small world," Meg used to say, "Actually, it's medium-sized."'

I say, 'I was about eleven when I knew Vincent.'

Then, like the hostess my mother taught me to be, I say, 'Vincent is a musician, too.'

'I used to be,' he says, and names the best-known of the bands he played in, though I happen to know it was only for about fifteen minutes. Then he asks Seth, 'Who do you play with?'

I can tell Vincent's impressed by Seth's band and doesn't want to be; he fast talks about starting up a start-up – an on-line recording studio, a real-time distribution outlet, a virtual-record label – he goes on and on, Vincent style, grandiose and impossible to understand.

I say, 'Basically, you do everything but teach kindergarten?'

Vincent says, 'There is an educational component.'

Seth comes off as gentle, even meek, but I know he's intolerant of talk like this. He squeezes my hand three times.

'Oh, shoot,' I say, looking at my wrist for a watch I'm not wearing, 'we have to go,' and I love the sound of we, and I love that it's Seth who wants to go and I love that we are going.

Vincent says they're headed to another party themselves. He kisses both my cheeks – what now must be the signature Enzo kiss – and he looks at me as though he cares deeply for me, a look I never got when we were together, a look that Seth notices, and I think Phew: Seth will think another man loved me; he will think I am the lovable kind of woman, the kind a man better love right or somebody else will.

Vincent says, 'You look great, Meg,' and I think of saying, Whereas you look a little strange, but I just say, 'See you, Vinnie.'

A few more pleasantries and we're in the elevator.

As soon as the elevator doors close, I say, 'Good thing she was just a model.' I am giddy just to be out. 'I think that would've been really hard if she were a supermodel.'

Seth looks at me, not sure what I mean.

Out on the street, I say, ‘How do you know her, by the way?’ and instantly regret how deliberately off-handed I sound.

‘I don’t really know her,’ he says. ‘She came up to me after a show a few weeks ago.’

I think, Came up to you or on to you? but I give myself the open, amused look of a bystander eager to hear more about one of life’s funny little coincidences.

‘She asked me if I would help her celebrate her half-birthday,’ he says, and his tone tells me I would be crazy to think he’d ever be attracted to her.

Unfortunately, now I am crazy, and I have to stop myself from saying a tone-deaf and tone-dumb, So you’re saying you didn’t eat her half-birthday cake?

Suddenly I feel like I’m Mary Poppins floating with an umbrella and a spoonful of sugar into the city of sexual menace, population a million Amandas with ultra-short and long straight hair and pouty mouths and thighs you can see through mesh stockings.

From there I go straight to This will never work. He has models coming on to him after his show. He’ll be forty-nine when you’re turning sixty. He is young and hip and you don’t even know the hip word for hip any more. You belong at home in bed with a book.

I remind myself that this is what I always say and what I always do. As soon as I’m in a relationship, I promote fear from clerk to president, even though all it can do is sweep up, turn off the lights and lock the door.

I am so deep in my own argument that I almost don’t hear Seth say, ‘Meg’.

He stops me on the pavement, and turns me toward him. His face practically glows white; he is a ghost of the ghost he usually looks like.

He says, ‘When did you go out with him?’

‘So long ago,’ I say, ‘he had a different name.’

‘Beelzebub?’ he says. Then: ‘Sorry.’

I tell him that I hadn’t seen Vincent for ten-plus years – he was still in purgatory when I knew him.

‘But it was hard for you to see him with somebody else, tonight?’

‘No,’ I say, a little surprised.

He nods, not quite believing. ‘But the thing you said about her being a model?’

‘Models are always hard,’ I say. ‘And it was hard to see her necking with your cheek.’

After I’ve said this, I want to say that I don’t usually use the word ‘neck’ as a verb, it’s a fifties word, my mother’s word, but he is shaking his head and I can see he is not thinking about how old I sound or look or am.

‘Obviously he still has a thing for you,’ Seth says, and shakes his head and swallows a couple of times, like he’s trying to get rid of a bad taste in his mouth. ‘The way he looked at you.’

My *Phew* gives me an Indian burn of shame. ‘That look was for Amanda’s benefit,’ I say, and I know it’s true. For a second, I am an older sister to my younger self. ‘And if she brings it up later,’ I say, ‘he’ll tell her she’s crazy.’

‘Very nice,’ Seth says, and his voice tells me that he doesn’t want to hear any more about Vincent and Amanda, he doesn’t care about them, and that he’s wishing he didn’t care so much about me.

It scares me. But then I get this big feeling, simple but exalted: He’s like me, just with different

details.

His eyes are closed, and I think maybe he's picturing me with Vincent or other men he assumes I've slept with or loved. Maybe he's telling himself that he's too tall or doesn't hear well enough. Usually he pulls me in for the hug, but now I do it. I pull him in and we stay like this, his chin on my head, my face on his chest.

I find myself thinking of Amanda at another party with Vincent, and feeling sorry for her. It occurs to me that if I were as beautiful as she is, every passing half-birthday would be harder to celebrate. But mostly I am just glad I am not her and glad we are not them, and glad just to be out here on the curb, breathing the sweet air of Williamsburg and post-colonial freedom.

We are quiet for a while, walking. I begin to see where we are now. We pass the Miss Williamsburg Diner. Little bookstores I could spend my life in. We pass a gallery with black-light art hung above a reflecting pool.

Then we're standing in a parking lot, outside of what Seth tells me is Bob's restaurant. I'm saying that living in Manhattan gives you a real appreciation of parking lots, when Seth takes something out of his pocket and puts it in my hand. It's a dollar. 'For the gift shop,' he says. 'Don't lose it now.'

With my dollar hand, I squeeze Seth's about thirty-seven times, telling him everything I feel.

He says, 'What does that mean?'

I say, ' "I'm hungry." '

What I feel is, *Right now I am having the life I want, here outside The Shiny Diner, Bob's or The Wonder Spot, with my dollar to spend and dinner to come.* We will try everything on the menu. Then we will drive through Brooklyn and cross the bridge with the Manhattan skyline in front of us, which looks new to me every time I see it, and we will drive right into it. We'll find a parking space a few blocks from my apartment on Tenth Street, and we'll pick up milk and tomorrow's paper. We will undress and get into bed.

Last Requests

GILES SMITH

Pork chop – nice and thick, kidney still in – with sprouts, a carrot-and-swede mix, mashed potatoes and gravy. Now, that’s a proper meal. And after, fruit pie and custard or cream. A proper, home-bake pie, mind you – none of your tins and packets. Proper, wholesome, homely food – what my husband Derek used to call ‘a bit of all right’. The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach and that was certainly true with Derek.

But a lot of them, these days, they don’t want that. It’s all burgers and fries. Milkshakes, some of them. Well, that’s not a proper meal, is it? Not what I call a proper, sit-down meal. With my three, every night, there was meat and vegetables and a pie afterwards, never fail. Or sometimes a crumble, or a jam tart, or a trifle, but always a pudding. Always. Not like these mothers now, with their yoghurts and their fruit if you’re lucky. And the kids all picky and refusing to eat. I’d have them eating soon enough, I’d crack the whip. No getting down until that bowl’s clean. Come on: chop chop eat up, or you’ll waste away. No danger of that with my Stephen. He had a good appetite. Went to Singapore for the bank but he phones at Christmas. Carl, my younger one, he ate well, too, though he smaller since he left home. He drops in from time to time. Brings the kids, but never for long. I always ask, ‘Will you stay for a meal?’ But he says he’s busy and I’m sure he is.

Steak – that’s popular. Quite a few of them ask for steak, and when they do, I try to get a nice one in, which is normally possible. I do a good steak. It was one of Derek’s favourites. Steak and kidney pudding, too, but sometimes just a nice, simple, lean, fried steak. A nice layer of oil and the pan at the right heat, which is as hot as it will go. The problem with steak is, it’s quite a long way from the kitchen to the Row. You’ve got to go out of the canteen block then across ‘Y’ yard and up three flights. It can take a few minutes, what with the security grilles. Really, with a steak, that’s not the best thing. ‘I won’t think it’s rude if it spits at me,’ Derek used to say and he was right. A steak should be out of the frying pan and on to the plate and then straight into your mouth, all hot and melty. You don’t want to wait around for a steak. In a way, they might be better off with a stew or a pie. Something that keeps its heat. I don’t think any of them think about that – though why should they? It’s not like they haven’t got plenty on their minds already, my God. The chips will be OK, though. Most of them want chips. Or ‘French fries’, they write. Well, the educated ones do. I think a chip should be thick, but if that’s what they want, I’ll do them stringy. I’ll do what they want.

I’ve been doing it for two and a bit years now, and I suppose you get into something like a routine. Especially recently. At first it was dribs and drabs, but of late, particularly with the bombings, it’s been more like a steady stream. There was all sorts of fuss when they brought it back. People say, we didn’t used to need it. But you’d have to say it was a more innocent world then. There wasn’t the terrorism, for one thing. Or there was, but not nearly so much of it. And you never heard about people having guns, the way you do now. And all the business with the children, which people got very worked up about. I don’t know why, as time goes by there just seems to be more wickedness generally. Like the one they sent off last night. Nineteen years old. Climbed a tree by a playground in a park and started firing. Eleven little ones he killed, and three mothers and an au pair girl, a Swiss girl, I think.

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