



# Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:16:00

## Orchid Delirium

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*“Into the shadows... Dark net... free lunch...”* The dulcet tones of the Radio 4 presenters lulled me in and out of sleep. What is more blissful than snuggling under a duvet on a Monday morning when everyone else is at work? I starfished my feet into the colder corners of the bed before drawing them back just for the luxury of retreating again into the warm fug.

The pips sounded to announce a new hour. 10 o’clock, I guessed. I would have to get up soon, but as yet the bed was too cosy to consider a move. I had plenty of time: all afternoon to think of inspiration for this week’s column, draft it out in the evening, sleep on it, finalise it tomorrow and have it to the editor by his 2 p.m. Tuesday deadline. This gave him time to correct, complain and return it for me to rewrite without the libellous, or even worse, non-humorous, phrases.

“Good morning,” intoned the announcer. It’s ten o’clock-“ well guessed – “on Tuesday the 24<sup>th</sup>...”

I jack-knifed up from the bed as if I were a twanged elastic band. No, no, no, no, NO! That was impossible – where had Monday gone? I tried hard to think – the weekend had been a solitary blur of red wine, pot noodles and too many cookies. With Lucy, my flat mate

away, I had resolved to spend the weekend writing my novel – a comedy masterpiece that would take the world by storm – as soon as I had resolved the plot weaknesses, perfected the comic set-pieces, and thought of the best ending.... and beginning. Had the weekend really turned into a 3 dayer without my realising? Had my mind-expanding naps condensed three days into two without my realising it? Whatever, I needed inspiration and quick. What had the radio been wittering on about? I scrawled down what I could remember; had they said: “Into the shadows” or “Into the Chateau”?

I strongly believe inspiration can come from anywhere, if you let your subconscious take control. With less than four hours to my deadline, and the nagging reminder that Marcus had already warned me that the next deadline miss would be my last, I had nothing left to rely on but a vague hope that the remembered random snatches of words would lead me to a story.

Chateau Hotel for a free lunch? There was bound to be a conference happening there on a Tuesday. If I could just sneak in, I could easily make a satirical few hundred words on the ridiculous pomposity of a bunch of provincial salesmen nodding their way through some mind-numbing seminar. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

By some miracle, there was a clean, ironed white shirt hanging in my wardrobe. I threw on my anonymously official navy suit and was out of the door and into my Fiat 500 before Martha Kearney had finished her introduction to Woman’s Hour.

Only a few moments later, I was driving up the long, wooded avenue to the Chateau’s car park. Abandoning my car in the nearest space, I grabbed my Press lanyard from the glove box, and notebook

in hand, I scampered towards Reception. Please, please, let there be something happening here.

Before the heavy, double front doors stood a well-muscled man in a dark suit and sunglasses who held up his hand to stall my entry. "I need your name, miss."

"I'm Press," I tried, and flashed my Press badge at him, mid-stride, still walking forward. It often worked.

"What paper?" he asked suspiciously.

"Observer." Note how I said Observer as if it were the national paper and not the local rag. Tricks of the trade.

The secret service wannabe flicked over the sheets on his clipboard. "Didn't think they'd have invited you liberal lefties. Are you sure?"

"If you have all the other papers mentioned, you're bound to have us." I sounded indignant, but inside I was flying. There was something happening here, something big, and I was going to scoop it. Oh yes!

I peered over the top of his clipboard. You soon learn to read upside down when you are (hoping to be) an investigative journalist and I jabbed at a name: "There, look, they have me down as the Guardian, not the Observer. Common mistake." And I flashed my brightest smile at him.

"Okay," he said, reluctantly, and ticked against a name. "You look like you're the only press that has got through the security cordon so far, and they have already started speaking."

I squeaked: "Security cordon?" before I could stop myself. It might explain now I thought about it, how I had sped here, without

seeing another car – or person. He too noticed my surprise and looked at me very hard.

“Better get myself in there.” And I brushed past him, before he had time to stop me.

And onto the next hurdle. An icy blonde conference professional was manning a table across the entrance hall, a few name badges in gap-toothed rows. “Good morning, could I take your name please?” I scanned the badges while I stuffed my lanyard back inside my jacket before she could realise that in this game of snap I held a losing card and grabbed a badge. “There I am, sorry I’m late.” I swivelled the badge to read it. Apparently, my new name was Dr Chris Charlton. I flashed it at the blonde who ticked me off and handed me a cotton bag.

“They have started speaking so if you could make your way in as quietly as possible, up the stairs and into the Main Hall.”

“Thanks.” I hustled off and as soon as I was up the stairs and out of her sight, I examined the bag’s side for a clue as to what I was letting myself in for.

It bore a Government coat of arms and the initials DOOM, subtitled: Department of Orchid Manipulation. Gold dust right there. No idea what it meant but there had to be satire in it somewhere, if only to snigger at the badly designed acronym.

Heads turned as I pushed through the hall door and I whispered my apologies as I stepped over feet to the nearest empty place. The man speaking at the stage lectern glared at me over his rimless spectacles but continued talking. I settled myself down and opened the cotton bag, hoping for more explanation as to what I had let myself in for. My rustling papers caused the middle-aged woman

next to me, in a matching suit and shirt to mine, to tut. I smiled an apology then stuck my two front teeth into my jutting underlip at her after she had turned away. I met the eyes of a woman two rows ahead who had turned to witness the tut and who now frowned her disapproval at my grimace. I raised my eyebrows at her and mouthed another mute apology and vowed that both of them would be mocked in my article.

The man on stage droned on indecipherably, and I felt my eyes begin to droop. The odd word caught my attention: *“supernatural....subterranean....orchid delirium”*.

The smell of warm croissants and coffee wafted over from a side table. So near and yet too far to risk disturbing everyone again. I wanted my breakfast – please God, let them be breaking soon, don’t make me watch that food being taken away because this lot had finished with it before my arrival. My eyes kept being drawn to it; the man on stage made no sense, there was no point listening to him; he was just the mid-morning filler.

What bollocks these biologists/botanists/ whatever they were, talked. If I could just find the sheet showing the speakers, the timetable for breaks and the proper name of this damned conference, I could start writing my column in my head while he droned on. I stole my hand into the bag again, slowly, slowly drawing out its contents, their every whisper of noise making the woman next to me twitch with annoyance.

The room broke into applause and I looked up to see a room full of – not people – but heads of grey seals bobbing up and down and clapping with their flippers. I blinked and blinked again and the room settled back into an audience of grey hairs, in a sea of navy polyester

topped with a foam of white office shirt collars. I guessed I really needed to eat.

Back on the stage, the reason for the applause was a new person on stage. Stepping in from stage right was a skeletally tall, thin woman, her dowager's hump encased in a silver grey, asymmetrically collared jacket, and shod in leopard skin, kitten heels. I recognised this woman – surely it couldn't be –

But it was. “Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. It gives me great encouragement in this time of our nation's need to see you here today. I shan't keep you long. This project has been a cross party collaboration and is as close to my heart as it is to many others. My government is committed to making hard choices and addressing the big challenges and nothing makes that more apparent than the reason we are gathered here today.”

Which was??

“Let me make myself clear - only my party can deliver the strong economy and a society that is stronger, fairer and more prosperous than it is today.”

I managed not to groan out loud. Who knew botanists leaned to the right like this? I would have imagined that beneath their fashion-sense-free facades they would have been old school hippies to a man – or woman.

“Which is why you may be surprised to meet our next speaker. Despite news reports to the contrary, he is on our side, and we have been marching in step on this. But who better to tell you more about this amazing project than..... JC himself!”

The audience rose and thundered their approval. I was ecstatic – a secret conference where JC and Mrs M stood on stage together – my editor was going to kiss my feet.

But the man who walked on stage was not who I expected. True he had white hair and a neatly trimmed beard, but his was a more rounded figure, his collar length hair brushed back, his expression avuncular, with a big nose and twinkling eyes. And his voice when he spoke was a warm, welcoming growl.

“My dear comrades!” He spread his arms wide. “It is no secret that I am a keen allotment holder. The press would have you believe I grow nothing there but fruit for my homemade jams and the odd courgette. But you all know, or are about to find out, that my produce has been much more exciting than that. In these dangerous times, when no neighbour can be trusted, I and my dear, dear friend, the right honourable lady here, have been working on a plan that will - ” his voice rose to a roar, “Transform this country – its wealth, its health and its general population!”

The crowd rose as one and the applause was deafening. Now was my chance. I ducked under the clapping hands in the direction of the buffet table. I had just time to catch up a croissant in a peach-coloured paper napkin and proffer a white, too small, cup to the spout of the coffee flask, when his voice thundered. “You! You there!” I turned, a rabbit caught in the headlights, to see JC pointing at me. “If you are so hungry, you can be the first to try our new concoction.” The audience gasped, a mixture of envy and disapproval. I shook my head and the audience sound turned to confusion and hostility.

“Who is she?” was hissed from several sides, and I thought it might be time to leave. Never even got to the free lunch! But before

I could make it to the exit, the doors opened and the icy blonde and the security guy blocked my path.

They each lifted me by an elbow and frog-marched me out of the room, JC and Mrs M ahead of me and the conference crowd at my back. I kicked my legs in the air to no avail as they marched along the corridor and through doors leading to a back staircase I had never noticed before. An ancient cherry-coloured carpet was held in place by pocked, brass runners which we descended, floor after floor, turn after turn, until we came to a sandstone archway which led into a high-vaulted cellar. A smell of mould and stone dust filled my nostrils. Huge oak barrels rested on their sides against the walls. I had never imagined the hotel's wine cellar would have been so ancient and so well-stocked – and so far below the ground. Despite its aristocratic name, it was after all, only a modern hotel built in the 1970s.

The barrels' fronts glowed with an iridescence; rather than a circular front with a tap protruding, their contents were visible: half-filled with soil and with long green tendrils extending out amidst exotic blooms of every colour. They all twisted and turned as if in a breeze and I realised in horror, they were growing and moving towards me as if seeking me out.

JC stood in front of me and raised his arms wide: "You will all be the first to witness the effects of orchid delirium on the first ever human subject. In my tests on wild, white rabbits in the lab, they become docile, biddable and suggestible from the first draught. Let's see what happens when a renegade –" He pulled so hard on my press lanyard hiding underneath my jacket that he broke the link and he held it aloft like the entrails from a sacrifice. Indeed, with the white flowing robes he had donned somehow since leaving the stage, he

looked very much a priest-like figure. “– PRESS INTRUDER! Takes a drink!”

The crowd hissed and booed behind me. I squirmed and twisted but I was clasped too tightly by my two guards.

My pinioned arms pulled, frantically trying to escape, as JC moved closer towards me with a beaker of thick green gloop that steamed gently. “Just one sip,” he coaxed, the long white sleeves of his robe brushing my cheek. What the hell, I thought, maybe just a sip, I was so hungry – never mind the consequences for now ...

But his robe covered my face so that even as I tried to sip, I instead took in a mouthful of cotton and I twisted my neck from side to side in an attempt to break free. My two captors were gripping my arms more tightly than ever. I tried to scream out but no sound came.

I spat out the cotton from my mouth and became aware that JC’s sleeves were in fact my bed sheets; my captors’ arms revealed themselves to be my tightly wound duvet, and the dulcet tones of Radio 4 were back:

*“Virtual realm.... Stuff of nightmares. .. and that’s all after Woman’s Hour on this Monday morning.”*

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*Additional Information:*

*Julia Macfarlane is the organiser and driving force of Bognor Regis Write Club.*