Thirteen



The entire world knows me. Recognises me. And yet I remain anonymously un-loved.

This is because I am possessed of a voice, you see, that has made me my fortune. And yet, contributed nothing to my happiness.

Of course, you know who I am - or at least, what I sound like. My unique voice, noted for its neutrality and blandness (and perfect diction, I might add), has been rented out to messaging systems the world over. Mostly the English-speaking world, but now I am branching out into other new markets. I am frantically busy, being asked to record new messages every day. Such is the soothing nature of my voice, that my producer/agent, one Cedric Longshaft, calls our output '*massages*.' He thinks that's an awfully funny pun. I humour him – such as I am able – as long as the massage money comes rolling in.

But I choose to work only two days a week now. Cedric bats away the most of the requests, and fits my schedule in and around those who will pay the most, and around his fishing trips to the island on the horizon. I don't *need* to do any more work. My voice

doesn't need it either. It's almost tired of hearing myself consoling myself, wherever I go in the world. That voice: it's my constant doppelganger of sound.

Yes, of course you have heard me. Untold millions have. You've heeded me. Then forgotten me, till the next time my voice slides effortlessly into your ears again. Does this give me a sense of power? In a word, no.

What is this special voice, you may ask? It the one you'll hear on every major voice mail system in the world. I offer up every call-centre menu. I'll put you though, once you have keyed in the 4-digit personal extension number. I'll calmly tell you where you are in the queue, and how much longer you might have to wait. (If I had heard all the expletives directed at me – my disembodied voice – on this one, I might have begun to crumble by now. Yes, I have heard some of them, for the purposes of market research, you understand, so that we may convey The Message even more neutrally next time.) Yes, you hear me a lot. At airports. At train stations. In banks. At tax offices. At funeral homes. Online. Not at shopping centres. (I don't – can't – do shouty). But in my area, I have, my good agent tells me, a near-complete one-person market-dominance.

There's a place where this all came from. There's a reason for everything.

My father is entirely different. His voice is rasping, urgent, mesmerising. Unforgettable too, as are his intense eyes. Both made more so by a lifetime of ever-cheaper whiskey, now rum (it's cheaper still), in the fetid little country upon which he has lately descended.

He's an 'installation artist.' A 'visionary.' My quotes. For I think these descriptors are mere euphemisms. He's a right bastard. An infuriatingly loveable and un-loveable one. No, he's more than a conflicted bastard. He hurts. As in others (never himself). Deeply. He drove my mother to suicide. He walked out on three daughters, when I, the eldest, was seventeen.

My *entire being* has been euphemism. Perhaps why, in a rare moment of prescience, right at the beginning, he named me Euphonia. My sisters, in sympathy, call me Euphie. From strangers, I ask for the name Nia. My voice asks none of this. My name doesn't carry,

and cannot be carried, by that voice. It is the perfect foil for the emotional cauterisation vested upon me, my sisters, by our father. The bastard.

How did I get into this? Studying French literature at University I read the weather report and the news, in English, on student radio. Until people began to ignore me. There was that one pivotal incident when so many students overlooked the campus flood warning that I had spoken. My voice was simply too calm to incite any kind of panic. The students stayed put. The water didn't. Which was when Cedric found me, up to my knees in brown river water that had invaded the studio. I believed it was my duty to stay put, reading out the evacuation messages. That is, until the electric circuits shorted, and the station went silent.

He laughed uproariously, as he carried me out. We got together after that. He tried to love me – *lust after* me – of course, but my voice stifled that. Still, it has given us a valuable foundation for an enduring, platonic business relationship. It also helps in succour, for the strings of women he has successively jilted. I seem to be their sounding board, no, rather their *soaking* board. My being has been softened, wrinkled (like toes too long in the bath) by the tears of Cedric's paramours.

For me, no other lovers have stuck. There have been twelve. I even tried one woman. My voice simply disengages them. I am otherwise attractive. This I know, because of my high hit rate on that app that matches people purely on the basis of their 'hotness.'

Cedric thinks this is the second-funniest thing in the universe.

My alone-ness has seen me developing strange traits. I've become a collector, of obscure Pre-Raphaelite watercolours. I've learned to love the speedway (the one thing my father passed on to me, a delight in inchoate noise.) I knit for my sisters, their husbands, their toddlers. I find solace in home restoration, and have become quite handy. Naturally, I live alone, if you can discount my mother's ghost as a sometimes tenant.

So, when into this monochrome existence, an elopement from routine is offered, I take it. But, in characteristic fashion, only at the second chance.

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A phone call. A journalist. No, he doesn't want to do a story on my voice. (Many, surprisingly, have). His topic is my father. *Modern Painters* want a magazine feature on the ageing *enfant terrible*. Thames & Hudson are considering a book. At first, I just don't want to know. I am brusque – as far as I am able to be. The writer concludes with a hopeful shot to try again.

He happens to call back, two days later, moments after I have picked up a striped thrush that has flown pell-mell into the glass of the French doors. As I register his voice on the phone, at the very moment, I feel the bird expiring in my hand. I say yes, wearily, *warily* yes. He has anticipated this, and says there's a flight we can take, one that suits him, in thirteen day's time. Will it suit me? Yes, I suppose so.

Somehow, I found my father's phone number. Found the impossibly long international dialling code (after listening to instructions, from me, on how to retrieve it).

I rehearsed his name. Oswald. I haven't spoken it out loud for years. Or will I call him Ossie, as he prefers? Certainly, it will not be Dad.

I haven't seen him in seven years. The seven years in which I have made so much money, so oddly. The seven years in which I have spoken to him far less than seven times. Twice, in fact. Once to tell him my mother (His *Un-Wed Wife*, as he called her, the cruel prick), had died. He hung up.

And this time, to tell him I am coming. I simply stated this as fact.

And he, Oswald, unbelievably (given his previous expertise at avoidance, at recoil) had shrugged on the line. It came across as a non-committal grunt. I took it as a yes, and informed him we'd be there in a week.

Righto, said he, if you can find me. As always, issuing a challenge; and me as always, rising balefully to it. Yes, I'd find him. There can't be too many wizened-white-English-artist-alcoholic-jungle-kings in that small tropical country. He's their only cultural export. Well, his outsider artist reputation, such as it is, within the arts establishment, is. For he travels no more. Oswald, the genius eccentric. Come visit the celebrity arsehole. If you dare.

Why did I do this for the eager young journalist? It's my biggest break, my first overseas

assignment, he enthused. I was strangely moved by his naïveté. I felt almost compelled to show him how a story can become unimaginatively complicated, from its initial superficial perspective. I felt a duty to reveal to him how romantic notions are apt to get dashed. I'd be doing him a favour; a lesson in growing up. I felt almost malevolent in this desire.

Also, I'd be getting away from my life momentarily. I needed that too. The last cutting words of the twelfth lover, hanging in the air as the door clicked shut in front of them. Those words. They called for the fleeing from them.

*

He smells nice in the plane. Despite his enthusiasm, he doesn't fidget in the seat next to me. He is respectful and polite. He spends most of his time reading a biography of Bruce Chatwin. Looking over his shoulder, I see the subject of that book is, also, a mean-spirited soul, though simultaneously a luminous artist. Familiar territory.

He offers me another book he has with him. *Nostromo*, by Joseph Conrad. He says nervously, proudly, half ashamedly, I've read it five times.

I look at its opening lines

"In the time of Spanish rule, and for many years afterwards, the town of Sulaco – the luxuriant beauty of orange gardens bears witness to its antiquity – had never been commercially anything more important than a coasting port with a fairly large local trade in ox hides and indigo…"

I continue reading, learning about the Golfo Placido, half-distractedly. My companion continues to devour his own book, only very occasionally glancing across to see how I am doing with mine. I drift off to sleep. Oswald invades my dreams. I start awake, to almost appreciate the benign presence next to me.

Then a coincidence has us chuckling. We both order rubbery omelettes. We hanker after them and both admit, shamefacedly, to a perverse delight in the nothingness of airline food. He takes pictures of the meals, at Beginning, Middle, and End; towards a photo-essay he says that will reveal how time is sliced, even when it's not a sliceable thing.

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The young writer quizzes me at mealtimes, in preparation for his interview. I'm not much help as an Oswald expert.

The one question of his that slowly twists in my mind, like a cordless drill running out of power, to stop, yet still stuck, is: *What colour are his eyes?* I can't see the point of this question – except to reveal that I can't answer it. I mumble a non-answer.

And keep thinking for hours afterwards, that perhaps mumbling uncertainty (except, of course in my precise professional diction) is the essential story of my life. And perhaps this trip may offer an alternative. But first, to find land again; rather it finds us, a steaming forest-scape rises up, breathing a warm and fetid humidity, until a ragged little runway opens up in front of the plane. We bounce twice on landing. Tyres squeal briefly. So do I, but not frighteningly.

To find Oswald Ormsly: as simple as asking directions at the airport car rental. It appears *mon pere* is a local legend, even if no-one appears to have actually met him. He's their pet recluse. He's more like a vapour, an illusion, but a pervasive one all the same. A national myth. A foul mist.

At this point, my travelling companion displays an idiosyncrasy, insisting on taking the thirteenth car in the row. The second-to-last one, as it happens. Normally, with the tiredness vested in me by long flights, I would be irritated with this. But not this time. I am more taken by noticing his birth date on the car hire form. He is thirteen days younger than me.

Oswald Ormsby? The response is the same at the small hotel we check into, a faded colonial edifice, looking out over a riverboat tours replica sidewheel steamer, the mainstay of the boutique tourism industry in this tiny country. Yes, they say at the front desk of the hotel, they know of him. But no, never seen him. Yes, they know his castle is two hours' drive that way. It's even marked on the tourist map. Next to the icon, there's an over-sticker on the map, that says *Private - do not visit.*

The journalist's sense of wonderment is charming. He insists on taking a picture of my hands holding that map. As I am looking down, I see he wears old, well-worn shoes, the only shabby aspect of him so far.

We head out to my father's place first thing next morning. We stop, at a rickety wooden bridge, for a breakfast of fruit juice and hotel sandwiches. We sit on a picnic bench thick with 1,000 layers of dark green paint. The surrounding forest is awash with birdsong. The river at our feet slides silently, deeply, tropically.

Without warning, he bends over sharply, and vomits a spray of rubbery omelette remnants over my shoes, his shoes. Covers his mouth and nose with prayer-shaped hands. Eyes plead apology.

Good thing there's a river to wash in, I say.

I take over driving. We sweep past the hand-splashed *Keep Away!* sign at the gate. Past another that says *I mean it, dolts!*

The roadway has grass knee-high in the middle, between the tyre tracks, brushing the underside of the car with what could be a reassuring sibilance. Sweeping into view, the grand citadel of outsider art is looking shabby, half forgotten. As if the jungle is claiming it back faster than he can create it. (I have only seen it in rare photographs, but still, it appears as an essay in entropy, a rotten dream backsliding. But then, you could say that is my prejudice.) The writer is all alert, his breakfast blitz-puke seemingly forgotten.

There seems to be no life at the place. I walk around. Ugly mosaics stare at me. Concrete gargoyles cackle silently. Strange weathervanes sit crooked, rusted stuck, oblivious to the wind. A dark grey bird sits on one spire. It calls in a harsh groan, repetitively. It sounds like a private expletive. The sun breaks over the thick line of trees. A door with cracked window glass creaks.

I find Oswald in bed with a woman my age. They're going at it like rabbits while three kids mutely squat by the door at the far side of the room, big eyes, sticky hair, running noses.

Things begin to happen faster.

He clambers out, wrinkly, naked, dripping.

I lose it. I swipe him furiously across his face with my travel bag. The clasp draws a jagged gash across his grey-bearded cheek. He bleeds, slowly at first, then profusely. I pant. The woman scurries out, gathering up the clothes and the children.

Euphie, says he, bewildered. He licks the blood streaming past his lips.

Oswald, I'm here. Still panting.

A semblance of order is restored. Oswald, who has always appreciated the unexpected, appears to enjoy the long interview with Dart. He raves on about his international importance as an 'in-out-sider-artist', the pre-eminent one within this absurdist self-made category. His rambling justification of why he has done nothing for five years ('A Fast', he calls it) is almost poignant.

The portrait taken of him, with soaked bandage, his untended 'environment' all around him, the grubby kids attached to his knees, I know will feature prominently in the articles.

We stay for hours, all uneasy for me, but not so for Dart, the writer. The woman and I prepare a lunch, a kind of paella. She speaks no English, I none of her native tongue. I see she is pregnant. I look. She nods, yes.

What to say to my father? There is nothing to say. I only hope – silently – that Dart has taken enough photos. (Later I will look at each one intently, from the pile of prints Dart will send me, before destroying them one-by-one. I keep only one image of the woman and the children.)

The tropical day comes to its short end. Rum for Oswald. Warm Coke for me and Dart and the kids.

We leave. Oswald says: That's it. Bugger off. Don't want to see you again. Slaps Dart on the shoulder, half playfully. The woman waves shyly.

He dares not touch me. He glances briefly at me. I note his eyes are a cold pale green. Don't forget your sisters, he says. I fume about this for hours. But then, I knew I would be angry – at whatever he did, whatever he said. And whatever I did.

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I drive back in the dark, headlights picking up whitened figures of forest animals crossing the road, and twice closer to the city, groups of drunken men weaving, waving machetes on rubbery arms. Dart says nothing for most of the drive back to the hotel.

We do not return to the castle. We do the river cruise to fill in the time. We see caimans in the water. They feed them raw meat to delight the tourists. Are we delighted? I don't know. Dart shrugs. A chuckle from me – the first in days.

We fly out three days later. I remain consumed by rage. He is quiet.

We return to our civilised city. Despite the excitement of the successful encounter (from his perspective anyway), Dart appears pale and sweaty. We part, fatigued, hardly registering, at the airport. Trains to separate destinations.

I hear from him three weeks later. A text that says:

Nia -
Sorry about no contact.
Am in hospital with
strange tropical disease.
Maybe that explains the spew.
(Sorry again).
Side effect = have lost my hearing.
They say it could come back.
Maybe.
Story going well.
Thanks for everything,
Dart.

And, thirteen minutes later, another text:

May I see you again?