

## **But I survived**

THE irritating thing about clichés is that they always express more than a grain of truth. When some wiseacre tells me ‘you don’t know what you’ve got until you lose it’, my hackles rise, but not because I’ve been subjected to yet another platitude I’m supposed politely to acknowledge.

‘Now, isn’t that so true!’ is what I’m expected to respond, but I never do. Perhaps that’s why I’m told I have a reputation as a grump. The trouble is it is true. And no honest man or woman can or should deny our lives consist of clichés. There’s the bored husband who has an affair with his secretary, gets her pregnant and is obliged to confess all to his wife. She, equally bored, is not about to pass up on a good thing. Yes, she’s devastated, but rejects all abject declarations of his remorse and regret and hires a good divorce lawyer. He must then marry the secretary and the wife’s free to do as she pleases on the back of a healthy settlement.

Me cynical? It almost happened to me, though I’m grateful to report my wife was not quite as venal, and despite it all still found she felt more than a little love for me. She forgave. The secretary? She’d invented the pregnancy (as I’d had suspected but had no way of proving). I did then begin to appreciate my wife a little more and for a week or two our sex life perked up. But there’s more to marriage than sex, a lesson every officiating vicar, priest, rabbi, imam, registrar and justice of the peace should stress, and it soon perked down again. But we grew closer. The old cliché.

You want other clichés? You’ll always be the last to know (as was my wife, although, as I say, I struck lucky. Many, if not most, do not). A stitch in time saves nine. Yes, it certainly does exactly that, but to be reminded by some wiseacre is insufferable. Only time will tell, laughter is the best medicine, time heals all wounds, there’s no fool like an old fool, what goes around comes around, all that glitters is not gold. All are so very true and all so bloody irritating, but not because they’re repeated by folk who make your life a misery in many other ways. It’s simply because they are true, all of them. That’s what gets me.

‘Ah,’ you say, ‘these aren’t all clichés, many are proverbs’.

Perhaps. But let me remind you a ‘proverb’ is just a cliché grown old and, with age, respectable.

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Yesterday morning, I went for a walk. I'd been laid up with a bad bout of influenza, and, no, not 'man 'flu' as many women will be insisting, but real, true bad influenza, and those who have had it will sympathise. It is not pretty. Yet with the good attention of my wife (who now seems to love me even more) my illness was tolerable, and two days ago I began to feel better. The acid test for me is that if when lying in bed beyond nine o'clock I feel guilty, I know I'm on the mend. I told my wife I'd be getting up. She advised against it and insisted on one more day in bed. I gave in. But yesterday morning I felt better still.

'OK, go get fresh air,' my wife told me. 'Go for a walk, see the day, get out, stretch your legs.'

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We live near a river, and I decided I'd do my stretching along its banks. It was there that (how do I say this) it hit me: my life was one big cliché. No doubt psychologists of every stripe can explain what took place and that it happens to many. But I am no psychologist, and as far as I was concerned what was happening was personal.

It is just a short walk from our house down the hill to the river and then you can follow the bank as far as you like. That is what I did. Maybe my senses were heightened after ten days in bed, unstimulated by anything but soup, sleep and mugs of tea, but I suddenly felt my life was going nowhere. Given my distaste for clichés, I'm obliged to respect that epiphany with quotation marks and report that I felt 'my life was going nowhere'. Yet I shall now strip away the quote marks because it was the truth: I did feel my life was going nowhere.

I am 44 and believe, or believed, myself (my affair with Deirdre notwithstanding), to be content. Our twins are now at college and no longer cluttering the house with dirty clothes, noise and scruffy friends; my wife has shown she really does still love me, we own a nice house in a pleasant neck of the county. I had every reason to be content. But it struck me that I had no reason at all to feel it.

Along the riverbank, on both sides of the trail, I spotted all manner of wild flowers. And what hit me, what upset me, was realising that I had no idea what they were, what they were called, by what names they were known to others. I was clueless. Then it came to me what was even more upsetting. If I were walking along this same river trail with Pete or Jeff or Antonio or David or Reuben, colleagues and neighbours, and I confessed my ignorance of the names of those flowers, they would laugh at me. Surely they would. And then the next thought: but would they? Perhaps they, too, after rising from their sick bed after many achy, painful days to stretch their legs along this riverbank, perhaps they, too, would be as upset when they realised they were also a stranger in this tamed wilderness. That they, like me, did not belong, that they had arrived hereabouts merely because they earned well and could afford the steep prices charged for local property; that there was nothing, but nothing, which connected them to these parts, to those riverbank flowers, those young, fresh flowers of all kinds, yellow ones, purple ones, one or two big ones, many small ones. They, like me, were the children of folk well-off enough to send them to a good college, one with a name that would stand out on any application form; they, too, worked for a respected company, one that valued hard workers enough to pay good money and allow them to meet the prices charged for local property. That was all I was: nothing but the lucky beneficiary of good fortune. Nothing more. That's all I was.

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The cliché? The cliché was that I was suffering from a mid-life crisis.

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There on the riverbank alongside flowers which were all strangers to me, I resolved to escape my cliché, to survive my mid-life crisis. Strolling along and musing, I thought upon what had long been niggling me, had irked me for many years. Had I shared what irked me with Pete or Jeff or Antonio or David or Reuben (if for once, we shared more than football scores, stale jokes and gossip) I might even have discovered that they, too, in private, felt what I felt. It was that I could never fully enjoy what I wanted to enjoy unless . . .

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Unless what? What was hobbling my enjoyment?

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Strolling along that riverbank, seeing those young, fresh flowers of all kinds, yellow ones, purple ones, one or two big ones, many small ones, it struck me. It struck me as a rare insight, a brief moment of wisdom, will strike a drunk. Deep in his or her cups and with a mind racing this way and that, he or she will, in a flash, know! Yes, of course! Of course! It's so obvious!

Then, all too soon, the cloys of wisdom fade and die away.

I do, though, recall what struck me on that riverbank: that I would and could enjoy nothing unless I found a way to pass it on, to share it.

But why? Pass on what and how to pass it on? Why did I feel compelled to pass it on? And pass on to whom? That's what those young, fresh flowers of all kinds, yellow ones, purple ones, one or two big ones, many small ones told me.

Yet finally they told me nothing. They were in their beauty the essence of life, yet equally the mute essence of nothing if I did not know what I had to pass on, how and to whom.

Ah, another cliché! What's important is what you don't know. Jesus how true.

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I returned along the bank and up the hill to the house and announced to my wife I was quitting everything.

'Everything? What are you talking about?'

'Everything, the lot, the rat race, the whole silly thing, the lot.'

'What silly thing?'

‘All of it, the lot.’

‘What’s the lot?’

‘All of it. I’m going to live! I’m really going to live! Look, do you know the names of those flowers down by the river?’

‘The names of the flowers along the river? I don’t think I’ve been down there recently.’

‘Exactly!’

‘Exactly what?’

‘You haven’t been down there recently! You’ve been everywhere else but down to the river.’

‘I know, but I’ve got a lot to do.’

‘Exactly. Exactly! You’ve got a lot to do and no time to go to the riverbank to see all the flowers that grow there! That’s exactly it!’

‘How are you feeling, dear?’

‘I’m feeling fine, never better, I’ve had a good rest and the walk has done me good, and in more ways than you can imagine. I realised . . .’

‘Realised what, dear?’

‘I saw it all, I saw my life, saw it all, saw what it was all about, saw it all, saw it all in those flowers on the riverbank and then not knowing their names, that’s what’s important, that’s what’s real, that’s . . .’

My wife came forward and put her hand to my forehead.

‘You’re burning up, dear, why don’t you get yourself back to bed and have a good sleep and we’ll talk about it in the morning.’

‘Will you come down to the riverbank and teach me the name of the flowers?’

‘Yes, of course, dear, we’ll go down there tomorrow and visit your flowers, but first you should get back to bed.’

I did, and I fell asleep. And if I dreamed, I can’t remember of what I dreamed.

. . .

That was my mid-life crisis, my cliché, though a rather brief crisis, I admit. Damn clichés.

I didn't quit, and still I don't know what to pass on, how and to whom. But the aches have gone, thank God.