A Soul on Ice

A Life in News

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I was summoned to the news editor's desk in front of the bay window with its view of Brighton Pavilion and the Corn Exchange. 'There's an author in reception,' the editor said without looking up. 'Do us a three-minute interview.' It was a kind of humiliation. I was trusted to do interviews with authors and academics and not much else.

I was a twenty-year-old, fresh out of university, on £44 a week. In the short time I had been working at Radio Brighton it had been made clear to me in dozens of subtle, and not so subtle, ways that I knew little about journalism – not the grind of daily police calls, magistrates' courts, council meetings, accidents and crime scenes.

My colleagues in this seaside newsroom had all worked on local papers. They had been snarled at by hard-faced editors. Their papers had paid for them to go on journalism courses in places like Portsmouth or Cardiff. They knew how to report from court or tap a policeman for information. I knew no shorthand and had never even stepped inside a magistrates' court.

I was on trial and not yet to be trusted with stories. Authors, however, were a different matter. They were not really news – more, features. You couldn't mess authors up. That was the view. I asked the editor whether he had any more information about the man in reception. 'His name is Green,' he said. 'Has a local connection.' That was often as good a brief as you would get in local radio. I picked up my Uher, a portable tape recorder, and headed down one flight of stairs.

There was only one man in reception and he was looking out of the window. He wore a green tweed jacket and gave the appearance of a university lecturer. 'Mr Green?' I asked. He turned and

I recognized the face immediately. He was older, but there was no mistaking the blue, questing eyes that I had seen staring from magazines and the back of so many novels.

'You're Graham Greene,' I said, unable to mask my surprise. 'Who did you expect?' he asked with a brief smile. I led to the studio the man who at the time was probably Britain's most famous author and who rarely gave interviews. He was sixty-nine, alert and watchful.

I had read *Brighton Rock* at university. Pinkie's world and the racecourse gangs had long gone. They had disappeared shortly after Greene had published the novel in the 1930s but many of the places he had referred to in the novel, like the Aquarium, the Royal Albion hotel and Dr Brighton's, were still there. There was a note of nostalgia about Greene; he felt the town with its shopping precincts and supermarkets had been drained of much of its character and had become indistinguishable from anywhere else.

When the interview was over he asked me what I wanted to do with my life. 'I want to be a foreign correspondent,' I said quickly and with great certainty. He gave a half-smile. 'You will have to learn,' he said, 'to keep your soul on ice.' He paused briefly before adding, 'But don't keep it there too long.'

I returned to the newsroom and wrote down what he had told me. These were thoughts from a man at the other end of his life; thoughts that had had time to oak and mature. I was too raw, too untried to have used much guile and deception to get a story, but I knew enough to suspect Greene was right. It was a chance encounter, but one I have never forgotten on a journey that has taken me from local radio to the BBC's *Ten O'Clock News* on television.

At the time I met Graham Greene I was brimming with ambition but had lived little. I had been born in Penge, south London, in the early 1950s. Over the years the places in our past develop colours, shades, moods. Penge, for me, has always been covered in smog, a dense, sooty soup that trolley buses disappeared into and which swallowed up the pub across the street. Looking back it feels Dickensian, with a bombed church next door, a ruin where the homeless lived amidst the rubble. It was a place to escape from. We did move away but we never travelled. The wider world beyond went unexplored and so it largely remained until I left university.

Even when I sat down with Greene I had been abroad only once and that was a few months earlier when I had stayed for five days at the Hôtel du Lac in Vevey, Switzerland.

A month after I had gone to university in 1968 I was persuaded to get on a bus and join a demonstration against the Vietnam war in Grosvenor Square, London. I was seventeen and had no real opinion about the war. I found myself amidst people with raised, clenched fists chanting, 'Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh.' At the time I scarcely knew he was the North Vietnamese leader, but the words shouted through bull-horns sounded dangerous and subversive. A woman close to me screamed 'pigs' at the police line and spat in their faces. I had never found anything to hate so much. I was surrounded by red flags, pictures of Che Guevara and angry men urging us to charge police lines. All I knew was that I was caught up in something, something threatening, and that at that moment the world was watching these streets and I was there. I was on a frontline I little understood, but I felt alive, involved and at the heart of things, and it was a feeling I would never forget.

It was not until my second year at university that I knew with a flash of certainty what I wanted to do. I had been watching a television report from Vietnam when I decided that was how I wanted to spend my life. I never wavered, I never had doubts. I wanted to be a foreign correspondent.

While at university I had been offered a job at Radio Brighton. After my finals I didn't even wait to get my results. I left the day my last exam was over. I wanted to be out there working, to call myself a reporter. I was in a hurry, tripping over myself.

Often at Radio Brighton we relied on 'walk-ins'. These were people who came in off the streets with stories to tell. As long as their tales were about Brighton they stood a fair chance of getting on air. It was one of my tasks to check out the 'walk-ins'.

One day a middle-aged man appeared in reception. He was scruffy, with dirt under his nails, and a little unsure of himself. He had been walking on the Sussex Downs and had found a small clay pot with a Latin inscription on it. He had no idea what it was but wondered whether it was Roman.

I examined the pot. Where the crusted earth had been scraped away I could see a hand-carved inscription underneath. I was

convinced by it. A local man had stumbled on an archaeological find. So I got him to tell the whole story on tape. During the interview I asked him to read out the inscription. He broke into an Italian accent, which emphasized the end of the words, and read, 'Iti sapis potan dati none.' On the tape I could be heard apologizing that my schoolboy Latin was not up to translating it.

Only after the interview had been broadcast as the final item on the local news did I return to the newsroom. Every face was creased in a smile. They were all looking at me. I had fallen for one of the oldest cons. There were many variations of this story, but by a little juggling of the letters the code was cracked to reveal 'It is a piss pot and a tin one.' I so wanted to be a reporter but I was giving every impression of being a klutz, a dork, gauche and gullible.

I had a piece of luck. The BBC was looking for trainees who were not just graduates but who had had some experience in local journalism. I was taken on and was suddenly in London close to where I wanted to be. We were a privileged few. As part of our training we had to work in a BBC office outside London. I got Belfast at the height of the Troubles and a chance to report on local television. It was unlike anything I had experienced before. The army patrols with soldiers peering through their scopes for snipers, the sirens of the bomb squads, the shudder of the explosions, the almost daily funerals. It seemed the most important, the most vital place in the world. It sucked you in until you lived and breathed every incident.

One day I was in East Belfast and saw a Protestant mob ransacking a Catholic church close to the Short Strand area. They did not want the cameras there and it was wise to leave. Just as we were walking away I saw a boy – aged about eight or nine – holding a statue of the Virgin Mary upside down and smashing the head against the edge of the kerbstone. In a second I knew this was the shot, this was the one moment that captured the blind tribal hatred. It was his young face, so focused, so concentrated on his task, so convinced that he was engaged in important work. I had to have the picture and I shouted at the cameraman. Even as we lined up the shot, rocks began landing around us. A stone splintered the back windscreen of our car. I jumped into the driving seat and we

bounced across the bricks and stones as the crowd kicked out at the doors.

Afterwards the cameraman avoided me. He did not want to work with me again. In my ambition to capture the story he thought I had been careless of those around me. Part of me knew he was right, but I couldn't get the image of the boy out of my head; nor the fact that we had missed it. Even now I still feel some irritation. I wanted people to see what I saw. So I became passionate about pictures, about finding those few seconds of action that take you to the essential heart of a story and make you, in a flash, understand it.

I was changing in a way Graham Greene would have understood. I saw much, but was learning to feel little – to be there but always detached. We would see the injured lying on the streets or watch the pale tear-worn faces at the funerals but rarely, if at all, did they seem to touch us. It was as if we were emotionally immune, inoculated, a breed apart who saw all the world's pain but never felt it.

By the age of twenty-five I was getting my chances on national news. The stories were slight at first but shortly afterwards I was covering the Iranian revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Iran–Iraq war. At the time a large photo of me was printed in the *Radio Times*. It showed me in an off-white suit heading into Heathrow with an exaggerated and rather improbable stride. I was living a rootless, suitcase existence, driven from place to place by the irregular beat of world events but often disconnected from ordinary life. At the moment my son was born I was locked up in Iran.

In 1981 I left the BBC and went to Canada as a senior correspondent for a Canadian network. Much later I would move to BBC *Panorama* and the BBC's *Ten O'Clock News*.

Early on I noticed that when I returned from covering major events or doing an interview the stories I would tell my friends were rarely what had appeared on television. It was almost as if there was a hidden account, a parallel version, an unofficial history that never got told. Sometimes they were conversations that had occurred when the microphones had been switched off. At other times it was the story behind the making of the film that was of more interest than the report itself.

Some of these stories were comic riffs – how we came to overtake the Pope's body – and others bordered on farce, such as when I was smuggled into an embassy for a secret meeting with Prince Charles. There were moments of fear – detention in Iran, facing a death squad in Guatemala, standing accused of spying for MI6. Sometimes I felt like Woody Allen's character Leonard Zelig, turning up everywhere and then finding myself invited to sit next to Jacques Chirac at dinner or taking puja with Rajiv Gandhi.

I witnessed defining moments in history. I was in East Berlin the night the wall came down. I went undercover into China after Tiananmen Square. I rode into Baghdad with the American Third Infantry Division. I interviewed world leaders: Chirac, Blair, Clinton, Mugabe, Indira Gandhi, Arafat and many others. In all of this there was so much that could not be said on TV.

There were the moments that occurred off camera. In 1985 I was standing at the top of the stairs of the People's Palace in Khartoum awaiting the arrival of American Vice-President George Bush. The Sudanese president at the time was Gaafar Numeiri, a general with nine rows of military honours stitched to his tunic. He was a hard man to make out; a one-time Communist who had recently embraced Islam.

In a fit of zealotry he and his aides had hurled bottles of Scotch into the Nile to mark the banning of alcohol. Sales of Nile perch had soared with the rumour that the fish had absorbed some of the Scotch. Numeiri was not without a sense of humour. When I had interviewed him at the palace he asked me whether I'd had a drink since being in the country. I replied, truthfully, that I had been dry. He then told me that he was improving my health and that I should be grateful to him. 'Look at what I am doing for you,' he insisted with an expansive wave of the hand. It was impossible not to smile.

The reason the Americans were in town had nothing to do with Scotch-throwing by the Nile. Several million people faced famine. A few days earlier I had driven west from Khartoum into the interior of Kordofan. It was as if the country had been visited by a terrible plague. Carcasses of animals littered the desert floor, their distorted faces mortified in the moment of final exhaustion. The wooden frames of deserted huts had been bleached white by the hubbub, the searing desert wind. Thousands of square miles of savannah

had been buried under sand. A million people from such tribes as the Kababish, the Beja, the Meidob were starving and on the move.

Sudan was begging for American help. So President Numeiri was pacing up and down nervously as he waited for the American vice-president to arrive. Finally George Bush shrugged off his clinging secret servicemen and bounded across the hall to embrace his Sudanese host. 'Ah, Mr President,' Bush gushed, 'my dear friend.' President Numeiri beamed through the bear hug.

The two men began walking up the stairs towards us. George Bush waved his hand at the window and said, 'What wonderful weather you have here.' There was a brief silence as the Sudanese leader looked out and blinked at the relentless sun which was slowly destroying his country. 'But there's a drought,' Numeiri said, with the bewildered look of a man who feared there may have been some terrible misunderstanding in the planning of this high-profile visit. 'We need water,' he added. Bush realized his gaffe and said, 'Of course and that's why we're here,' and concealed his embarrassment in another embrace.

The cameras were not on the stairs. They were in a separate room waiting for a press conference. If George Bush's remarks had been recorded they may have dogged him during his campaign for the presidency. Of course it had just been a gaffe but, in fact, the Americans did have a different agenda. They were more interested in signing up Numeiri as an ally against his troubling neighbour Mu'ammer Qaddafi.

There have been other moments when I feared I had betrayed everything I stood for, when I felt I had crossed the line from reporting the news to making it. During the war in Iraq I travelled with an American tank company all the way from Kuwait to Baghdad. One day, having been ambushed and fired on, we stopped near an electricity sub-station in the western part of the Iraqi capital. The tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles fanned out and formed a defensive ring.

I was sitting on top of a tank-recovery vehicle idly using my binoculars. As I panned around I noticed a blue truck with men lifting off what seemed like boxes of equipment. They worked at a pace, as if they were anxious about being discovered, and that's what made me pan back to them. As I looked I noticed a man in

front of the truck who was studying our unit, possibly with binoculars.

I was suddenly afraid that we were about to be attacked. Part of me wanted to stay silent, to do nothing, to pretend I had not seen anything. After all, this was not my war; but I was there and these were the people I was travelling with. I called across to the captain and said he should check out the blue truck. I thought he might send a tank over to investigate, but he ordered a Bradley to open fire. Tracer rounds flew across the open ground. The captain was shouting to the gunner, 'Keep it low, keep it low,' but the rounds were bouncing off the truck and flying into the buildings behind. I was horrified, sickened. On my word innocent people might be losing their lives.

The blue truck exploded. In the orange fireball I saw what looked like a person flying through the air. Then the truck exploded again, and once again in a final deafening blast. This secondary explosion was confirmation to the soldiers around me that the truck was carrying rocket-propelled grenades. Soldiers high-fived me. One man came up to me and said, 'You saved my life, man.' It didn't feel like that to me. In making television news there have been frequent dilemmas, moral dilemmas, and I wanted to write about those too.

Just occasionally there have been moments when the mask of detachment has slipped. In 1988 I was in Prague with the Communists still in power. We had filmed secretly as the playwright and dissident Vaclav Havel had once again been sent back to prison. We had been to see his wife, Olga, in their apartment overlooking the Vistula. She kept a black scorpion in a jar and remarked how even from jail the words of her husband could frighten the authorities.

A few days later, in one of the main squares, the Communist Party was holding a rally. We had been tipped off that some students might disrupt the speeches. We waited near the platform until we heard some booing and then moved through the crowd to where the trouble was. We were among party members and they did not want us filming any protest. Suddenly two or three secret policemen began pulling at the leads at the back of the camera. Without a moment's thought I was shouting at them to get their

hands off the camera and I grabbed one of the men. Having watched the harassment of men like Vaclav Havel I was seized by a fierce, almost irrational hatred of these party thugs. I heard the voice of an old man shout, 'CIA provocation.' The students saved me from a beating or worse. They grabbed us and hurried us to the edge of the crowd and put us in the back of a car, while their friends struggled with the police. There have been other moments, although not many, when I have found it impossible to stay on the sidelines and they, too, form part of my story.

As I looked back over my notes I realized that many of the stories were about the making of television news. In 1966 President Lyndon Johnson had remarked, looking into the cameras, 'All of politics has changed because of you.' Asked what had caused the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, Lech Walesa, the leader of the independent union Solidarity, had pointed to a nearby TV set and said, 'It all came from here.' Most people get their news from television.

Everyone, it seems, now knows the power of the image, that one shot can echo around the world and change perceptions. Governments kill to stop pictures getting out. In Zimbabwe a cameraman and I had to flee a mob with machetes who had been told to stop any pictures being taken of their attacks on farm owners.

Frequently I have heard the cry, 'Get the cameras.' In May 2002 we were covering an anti-globalization demonstration in Genoa, Italy. We were filming anarchists smashing a car showroom when they spotted the camera. Four youths wearing black masks and carrying sticks attacked us, seized the £30,000 camera and threw it on their bonfire of the modern.

In many different ways politicians, movie stars and royalty all try and control the image. There is a daily tussle over what appears on the nightly news and I have been at the heart of major controversies. Here, too, I wanted to write about some of the arguments off screen, the out-takes, the offcuts.

During the British election in 2001 the Labour Party wanted all controversy, all unexpected moments, drained from election coverage. They were ahead in the polls and gave the impression of just wanting to count down the clock to voting day. From their perspective they were right. The only image that is remembered from that

drab campaign is the punch thrown by Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott. It was played, re-played, slo-moded from every angle. For the first and only time the boxer Frank Bruno found himself commenting on an election campaign.

As a special correspondent for the BBC I did several reports on the party leaders. I travelled for a period with Tony Blair in his battle bus and flew with William Hague in his helicopter. During these journeys I would do a short interview about the campaign. One day I was with Tony Blair and the Labour bus on the outskirts of Leeds. My cameraman, Hedley Trigge, and I were the only journalists present.

As we approached the city the bus driver lost his way. I looked out of the window and we seemed to be in the middle of an industrial estate with storage warehouses. We then came to a narrow bridge and the driver stopped. We were sitting a few rows back from him. He was clearly agitated and was looking for someone on the street to talk to. Rather red-faced he announced that he was unsure whether the bridge could take the bus's weight.

Gradually everyone ended up at the front of the bus discussing this, including Tony Blair, one of his closest aides and a special branch officer. I was immediately struck by how unusual all this was. In the United States this would have been headline news. It would have bordered on the scandalous for the president's motorcade to have lost its way. Yet here was the prime minister stranded in front of a narrow bridge with no place to turn.

I said to Hedley that we should record this. It was not a significant moment but it was of interest. As soon as we lifted the camera we got into an argument. 'You can't film this,' said one of the prime minister's staff. 'Why not?' I asked. Tony Blair looked irritated and it was made clear that future access during the campaign would be denied unless the camera was turned off.

So – and I regret this – we put down the camera. Moments later the incident was over and the prime minister was transferred to a special branch Land Rover Discovery. In one sense it was all trivial, but in our image-conscious world it mattered enough to argue over. Those incidents, too, formed part of the stories that I told friends but rarely, if at all, told the viewer.

It was after I had returned from covering the war in Iraq that I

felt it was time to go unplugged, to unfreeze Greene's 'soul on ice', to sift through the notebooks, the video clips, the memories of colleagues and to tell what happened beyond the eye of the camera. Not just the skein of major events, but the humour, at times surreal, of a life on the road. Nearly every story here was shared and I have been able to raid the recollections of friends and colleagues. There are some confidences that cannot be broken, promises made that must be kept, but, where I could, I have told it how it was.