

When Strangers Talk

By [Kenneth Francis](#) (November 2018)



Old Man and Puppy, Henry Kondracki

They treat me good in this place. When I say good, they

give me what I expect from a home for the half-dead. And the nurses marvel at my great memory. I can remember where I was on my sixth birthday. I even remember what I was wearing. And I never forget the nurses' birthdays.

The other patients remember nothing. But I'm like a loner elephant, sitting in a zoo surrounded by senile goldfish. When I say surrounded, I mean in other rooms; out of sight. Yes, I like living here. I feel safe with the angels hovering 'round me.

Even though I have my own private room, it's secure from burglars because there are bars on every window. Not the type you see in prisons or asylums, but the fancy ones that posh people put on their windows to prevent break-ins.

And the bars don't spoil my view of the ocean while I sit alone all day and stare out at the sea. It may seem boring but I enjoy doing nothing for hours and hours. Even if I sometimes drool a little when I'm knocking off to sleep, it doesn't bother me because, at certain times during the day, I get a perverse pleasure in feeling like I'm lobotomised. It's as if being braindead is liberating: no work, no tedious protocols or obligations, no one to offend, no one to offend me; no worries.

Anyway, I was always physically lazy and longed for the day when I could experience the ultimate shutdown in solitude. Besides, like I said, the service here is good and the staff treat me like I'm their granddad. And when I'm not staring out at the sea, I sometimes read one of the great Russian classics and lose myself in it.

There's a whole box full of them under my bed. The immense suffering in these stories are of great comfort to me and keep me sane. Don't get me wrong, I don't mean this in a schadenfreude way. I mean it in a *there go I but for the grace of God* sense.

These scribes of Old Mother Russia seem to do misery like no other writers can. Perhaps it was the outside forces that imposed itself on the Great Bear or the terrible cruelty that Communism brought that inspired a generation of talented thinkers.

Or maybe it was the harsh climate, with long freezing winters, that stirred the imagination of these marvellous intellects. I can't imagine the same material could ever be produced in the tropics. *Crime and Punishment* or *War and Peace* coming from Hawaii? Not a chance.

Neither could I imagine Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* being written under a coconut tree. Grass-skirted, tanned beauties hula-dancing in the sun under palm trees is no literary inspirational match for a gang of old babushka ladies wrapped in sackcloth shawls shivering in the snow at the gates of a death camp.

Speaking of death camps: as a young man, the thoughts of ending up in this place was akin to a Siberian prison, or worse. But I was wrong. Like I said, they look after me well and feed me when I'm hungry. And out of respect, some of them call me Mr Dexter.

Some of my old friends used to call me Dexter, and that was out of disrespect! But the staff here are sound. They say, "Are you warm enough, Mr Dexter?" In the winter they make sure to keep the heating on a perfect setting; and in summer the air-conditioning keeps me cool.

The evenings are my favourite times, as the nurse brings me a China cup and a teapot half-filled with whiskey (she knows I like my "tea" special). I'm extremely generous with tips, so our little arrangement is also our best-kept secret.

And she gets to buy the latest fashions. Always keep on good terms with a nurse. Some of the other patients who start

off abusing them and are difficult to manage, mysteriously become calm and docile; you see them lying in bed looking so comfortable. Some who have a terminal illness say they are not afraid of dying.

It's amazing what morphine can do. I took it once and felt like Thor. Not anymore though; special tea is the tipple of my choice. And after a couple of cups, I reminisce on the past then slowly fall asleep.

But last night, I found it difficult to drift off. I think it was something the nurse said. She mentioned a stranger had been seen out walking in the garden but he quickly disappeared; no one had spoken to him.

For some reason this triggered a memory many years ago on my 30th birthday. Back then, I was living in a two-bedroom apartment on the edge of the city beside a large factory.

During the day, the smoke would block the view of the mountains many miles away. Sometimes the mountains looked black or blue, other times they were hidden by smog. That day of my birthday, they were hidden.

I remember later during the night, my late wife was in bed with a bad cough, so we cancelled a restaurant meal she had arranged for my birthday. The following day she remained in bed recovering from a sleepless night of coughing.

We were due to view a house for sale in the country but she stayed at home watching TV. I took my dog Leo with me to view the house located in a country village 50 miles away.

The pollution in the city had finally made life for my wife's health unbearable. And what better place to breathe fresh air or walk a Jack Russell through the fields of a rural idyll?

On the morning of the trip, Leo pulled hard on the lead

as we headed for the train station. The streets in the city were quiet. An old homeless man sitting beside the station's gate, softly sang a song about Jesus loving him. I'll never forget how happy he looked.

I thought he was drunk but when he stood up and got close to me, his breath smelt of orange juice and his flawless complexion glowed in the sun. He must've been in his late-70s. I offered him some loose change but he refused to take it and said a train was due and I'd better hurry up or I'd miss it. He patted my shoulder and told me to take good care of Leo.

I can remember boarding the carriage as if it were yesterday. Leo started to drool when he saw two fat kids on the opposite seat licking ice-creams. A pretty woman beside them, which I assumed was their mother, was putting make-up on her face.

Leo sat on my lap and I placed my sunglasses over his sensitive eyes as the sun beamed through the window. This made the children laugh and brought a smile to the woman's bee-stung lips.

Throughout the journey, I couldn't help thinking about the old man at the train station, singing about Jesus. It was like Heaven was his destination. When Leo and me reached our destination, the station was deserted.

In the distance, I could hear an out-of-tune choir singing a hymn. I think it was 'All Things Bright and Beautiful'. Farther up by the river, stood the little estate, surrounded by trees.

The houses were half-built and deserted, with scaffolding around the odd, redbrick semi. We walked on till we came to a spot where some of the houses in the estate were complete. At one of the houses, a young security watchman was holding a can of beer and looking over nervously at Leo.

I asked him where was everyone and he told me they didn't work on Sundays. He kept staring at Leo, then spoke of his dislike of dogs because one had attacked him as a child.

When I reassured him Leo was docile, he told me that behind one of the houses was an old pet cemetery. I asked could I see it and he took me around the back of a house to where a row of apple trees stood in front of a wall with a tall iron gate in the middle.

Over the gate, a wrought-iron sign read: 'Kingdom of the Moon'; underneath a smaller sign read: 'Dog Pet Cemetery'. There were lots of workmen's tools beside the gate and inside the cemetery stood over a dozen headstones, most of which had moss growing on them. I spotted an inscription on one of the headstones which read: 'Boxer – 1913-1924; You lived through the Great War and were loyal to me till the end'.

Other inscriptions showed the average dog died aged 11 and 13. I remember looking down at ten-year-old Leo and feeling sad. The labourer told me it was called Kingdom of the Moon because the man who built it was an astrologer who died after the Second World War.

He told me that the cemetery was to be demolished and replaced with a swimming pool. When I said it was such a shame to destroy the old tombstones, he picked up a sledgehammer and started to break-up Boxer's grave.

I grabbed the hammer and tried to stop him, while Leo bit his leg. Screaming aloud, he fell on the ground and banged his head. As he lay motionless at my feet, his eyes wide open, I began to tremble with fear.

Man, it all seems so long ago. Isn't time strange? Which reminds me: It's 20 minutes to teatime; that's "tea" in inverted commas, if you get my gist. Anyhow, I digress; now where was I? Oh, yes, the labourer lying on the ground; not a move out of him; his eyes wide open.

I remember feeling his pulse, but there was no movement and there was a smell of alcohol off his breath. Hanging out of his pocket was the wad of bank notes. It started to rain, so I took the money out of his pocket and ran out of the estate. I don't know why I stole his money but something made me do it.

When I got home, I put the dog onto his blanket. As my wife snored in bed, I lay on the couch all night, worrying about the man; wondering if he were dead or alive. The next morning, I never mentioned the incident to my wife.

Later at work, I tried my best to act normal but I could hear work colleagues whispering behind my partition. I quietly stood up and walked out of the office and went down to a corner cafe.

It was run by a family of Hare Krishnas, and the owner, a little fat man called Lucas, was cutting cheese behind the counter. He told me that in a previous life he had been a Roman emperor called Commodus (why is it never a Morris dancer called Dudley? Or a binman called Bert?).

Anyhow, he was in the kitchen talking on the phone. I'm sure he mentioned my name twice. I quickly left the café and walked back home. I remember stopping at a bar beside a cobblestoned laneway. I could see, and just about hear, the TV news from a small, open window. I watched and listened to the main headlines from outside the pub but there was no mention of a man being killed like the one I met.

I continued walking down the laneway, which curved its way round the corporate strip. I heard footsteps in the distance but couldn't tell if they were behind me or in a different street nearby. Then a van drove quickly by and sped up the lane. I turned a corner and decided to give an old friend a visit. His name was Tom and I hadn't seen him in years.

I needed to talk to someone and tell them about what happened. Tom was a good listener and good at giving advice, despite him messing up his own life. He lived on a third-floor apartment in the middle of the laneway. I could see his TV flickering through his window but the main door was locked, so I picked up a small stone and threw it up at the window.

A young man opened the door and looked over at me. I explained that I wanted to go up and see my friend and the man kindly let me in. Arriving at Tom's landing, I knocked on his door a few times but there was no answer; as I was walking away, the door opened. A man with a shaved head and pencil moustache stood slouched in his dressing-gown; his bloodshot eyes peering through spectacles without lenses; he stood there holding a glass of wine in his hand.

I said, "Tom, is that you?" He never answered. He walked back into the room and stood staring out the window. I followed him into his flat, which was very warm and smelt of burnt grass and fried meat. I remember saying his name again but he wouldn't turn around. Then he said, "You can't talk to strangers anymore; there's no continuum. There . . . is . . . no . . . continuum."

Once again, I said, "Tom . . . It's me, Dexter; don't you remember me?" But he just stood there staring down at the street as the rain began to fall. His last words were, "You talk to people here but they just don't answer you." It was then that I felt a little bit uneasy; it was like talking to a stranger.

Maybe he's gone mad, I thought. Maybe we're all mad? Anyhow, I left his flat without saying 'goodbye' and continued walking home. I was never quite sure if he was really Tom or someone else living there. Anyhow, the next day I didn't go to work. I boarded a train and went back to the estate.

When I arrived there, I saw the labourer with a bandage

on his head pushing a wheelbarrow. I went over to him and said, "I thought you were dead. Are you okay?" The labourer said, "I was on my feet minutes after you left. It's only a scratch. Anyway, it's just as well you tackled me. The owner's wife convinced him not to demolish the cemetery. They're going to have it restored."

I said, "When I knocked you down and ran off, why didn't you call the police? I took your cash." The man stared at me. "You took my money? I thought I lost it." I said I was sorry and handed him my phone number, telling him I'd pay it all back.

When I arrived home, Leo had died in his sleep. But I never cried. I was more saddened for the old man at the train station. I bought him an expensive sleeping bag but when I arrived at the station, the man was gone.

A young woman, who worked at the station's cafe, told me he had died in his sleep two days ago. She said the man didn't drink or smoke and she fed him every day with sandwiches and coffee.

She said during the heavy snow, he would sleep inside the station's waiting room. I sometimes feel like I'm sitting in a waiting room. I hope when I die, God remembers the sleeping bag. And if he lowers it from the sky for me to hold onto while he pulls me up, I won't kick off any lost souls who cling onto me while I'm hoisted. I could never do that.

I wish my tea would arrive. I'm so tired.

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