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**THE WHALE-SHAPED HEDGE**

Though I had no idea at the time, it began with Krentoma. Usually the other tribesmen would talk about him with a grin. Or was it a smirk? Certainly whenever Krentoma's name came up a smile would form somewhere in the group and slowly spread, until I was surrounded by men smiling to themselves or at each other. Some would shake their heads. The leader of the tribe, Teseya, a stout man with a stomach that was solid and round like a basketball, had touched his head, rolled his eyes and chuckled silently, as if gagging. I was about to jump up and give him a motherly thump on the back when he stopped, turned to me and repeated the name as if it was a secret, or a curse of some sort.

'Kren-tom-ah,' I said to myself, trying to put the stress on 'tom' the way Teseya did, but not quite managing.

The next day I met him. To look at, he was unremarkable. His complexion was hale and worn, there was a tang of stale fruit on his breath and his eyes were small and dark. Nevertheless he was the spark. This was the man who, without meaning to, started me on a journey deep into the irreverent and inventive fringes of English society: a quest that would end a little over a year after it began on a street in South London as I tried to find the remains of a whale-shaped hedge, yet by then I had already found the person I was looking for. The leader of the tribe. I won't say who it was as that might ruin it; and if you're one of those people that turns to the back of books to see how they end, don't. Please. It's not right at the back anyway. I've hidden it.

In the year leading up to that day in Brixton I would meet a cast of characters more weird, yet more gripping, than any I could invent: from reincarnated English monarch to gnome collector and leopard-man via Ikea-loving dominatrix, dissident, crop-circler, hermit, sado-masochistic artist, celebrity aristocrat, Serpentine swimmer and superhero who dresses as a baked bean, all the way through to the doyenne of English fashion, Dame Vivienne Westwood and the jaded rockstar known to the English tabloids as 'Potty Pete': Pete Doherty.

That was all ahead of me. For now it'll have to wait.

Once I had sat down, Krentoma asked if I'd like to see his house. Hadn't I seen it already, on the far side of the village? No, said Krentoma, turning to me. His gaze had the suffocating force of a limpet. That was not his house, that was merely where

he slept. The house of Krentoma was different. He would not say why and instead looked away, face full with the satisfaction of a man withholding an answer, heaved himself up and beckoned me to follow with a lazy swoop of his hand. He began to walk towards a wall of Amazonian rainforest beyond the village. I started after him. The air was thick with an equatorial midday fug as we padded past the remainder of the village, no more than a handful of huts made from wood and straw arranged in a perfect circle. Their doorways, uniform in design, faced away from the forest towards a communal centre, like wagons in the American Mid-West parked for the night. I remembered being told the previous day that the exact position of each hut within the circle revealed the clan or social status of its occupants, even the location or protean shape of the doorway was significant.

Krentoma remained two paces ahead of me. I began to wonder where we were going. The rainforest was unusually quiet for that time of day. Visually though, it was as noisy as ever: a dizzying tapestry of green, vermilion, turquoise, cadmium yellow of different hues, lime, jade, all dotted with peepholes that allowed glimpses of the scaffolding of trunks and branches beneath that groaned with the weight of the canopy above.

Only a few yards into the rainforest we arrived at a clearing. Krentoma stopped. Before us lay two rectangular sections of concrete that looked like foundations for a house. Strewn about next to them, as if wreckage from a hurricane, I could make out a muddle of corrugated iron strips that had browned like rotting fruit in the warmth and damp. Krentoma stood with his hands on his hips and surveyed the scene, his eyes darting back and forth anxiously.

“My house,” he explained, in Portuguese.

I looked at him blankly.

“The beginning,” he said, correcting himself. His gaze returned to the discarded crusts of iron and concrete. “I don’t like these huts of wood and straw.” He waved over his shoulder at the village, screwing up his face. “Too old, too old. This is the new house where I will live.” He beamed. “Made from iron. In the forest. The house of Krentoma!”

He picked up a sheet of corrugated iron and waved it around. It rumbled like thunder in a school play. I nodded enthusiastically. He stared back at me and without breaking eye contact lifted the iron above his head and began to drum his fingers on the atrophied metal, making a sound just like rain. His hut would be waterproof I decided as I continued to stand with my hands behind my back, not knowing what to do, treading water and waiting for him to make the next move.

“It is good, yes?” Krentoma asked, smiling.

At this point I recognised him. Not in the sense of having met Krentoma in a former life, or remembering a friend who looked just like him, he was familiar simply as a type. An eccentric. He was the resident eccentric here in Nansepotiti, a village hidden in the heart of the Amazon rainforest. That was where I'd seen him before. Even the etymology of the word seemed to agree. Originally eccentric was written as 'excentric', meaning 'out of the centre' or 'away from the centre', which made Krentoma's decision to build his house so far apart from the rest of the village uncannily apt.

Krentoma was the villager who chose not to conform to all of the social mores, taboos and accepted truths that he had grown up around. Infuriating one moment, hilarious the next, he was both inventive and stubborn, a loner, a maverick, larger-than-life and at times Promethean, or at others childlike: an eccentric in every sense of the word.

Fine. He was an eccentric. But – in the words of the ex-biker now druid chieftain I would meet eight years later – so what?

Let me explain. What made him or at least my understanding of him different was that over the next two weeks in the village I got the impression that this particular eccentric had a *function* in the group he was a part of; it was as if his tribe, the Panará, actually needed someone like Krentoma in their midst.

Up until then I had thought of eccentrics as curiosities. Follies. Doilies rather than armchairs. Each one an oddity that their neighbours tolerate rather than champion. Yet just as every football team has its oddball goalie, and every court its jester, I began to sense that the Panará would be incomplete without Krentoma or someone like him. If he didn't exist, you'd have to make him up. The problem was, I had no idea why they needed him, nor did I know what it was that actually made someone eccentric. I certainly – perhaps fortunately – had no idea that Krentoma's role as resident eccentric had allowed him, and in some ways required him, to murder a fellow tribesman five years earlier. He had slit his throat in the middle of the night.

Instead I left the village and flew back to England toying with the idea that every group of human beings, from the heart of the Amazon to the outskirts of Aylesbury, had a deep-rooted need for a non-conformist, creative character in their midst: someone who teeters on the edge of social exclusion yet manages to remain on this side of the law, just, a figure who makes primordial connections that others in the group don't. A man or woman who does not care what other people think, and who

symbolises the less inhibited and more instinctive and childlike approach to life that deep down most of us aspire to.

Just as it was fun to mull this over, I knew that this was the kind of plane-philosophising I'm prone to when drifting in and out of sleep in a pressurised cabin after looking out of the window for too long. There was still very little I knew about eccentrics or eccentricity. I had met Krentoma, that was a start, but it wasn't enough, and it seemed best to limit my theories on eccentrics to things I was sure of.

One of the only things I knew about eccentrics with absolute certainty was that England – home – was famous for them.

Eight years passed.

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Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> August 2006: it was about eight-thirty in the morning and I was slumped in front of a television, eating cereal, dribbling milk into my beard and watching BBC London News. One of the first items to appear was a report from Lambeth. Something to do with a hedge.

I focused on the screen and there, framed by the grubby white plastic of my antiquated Philips television, was Zac Monroe, a friendly-looking architect in his mid-thirties. The voice-over announced that several years ago Mr Monroe had won the World Air Guitar Championships. He was now standing in front of a hedge wearing a ribbed black polo-neck with leather padded elbows that made him look like Captain Birdseye's First Mate.

Zac explained in an agitated, middle-class register that he had recently received a letter from the council complaining about the hedge in front of his terraced house. It wasn't that he had let the hedge run wild, no, the council had written to him because over the last few years he had carefully trimmed his hedge into the shape of a whale. It even had a blowhole with a blast of water shooting skywards that had been rendered with a white-flowering shrub that fanned out at its peak – just as spray shooting out of a whale's blowhole might. In their letter the council thought that Zac's topiary was obstructing the pavement and posed a threat to passing pedestrians. Blind people were being forced into the road they argued.

Already I could feel some of Zac Monroe's anger bubbling up inside me. You could see that this hedge was not forcing people out into the quiet, residential street. Yes, it bulged a little over the pavement, but you would have to be at least a metre wide to collide with it.

“None of the local residents mind the hedge,” insisted Zac Monroe, confidently. “In fact they love it.” He was gathering momentum. “The hedge gets compliments from passers-by the whole time. I mean some of them think it’s a peacock but I’ve got used to that.” He paused. “What I still don’t understand is why the council even bothered to write to me in the first place. I was utterly astounded when I received the letter.” His eyebrows were knotted together now, begging the viewer to be astounded too. “I mean have they really got nothing better to do?”

‘Exactly!’ I wanted to shout, though with no-one else in the room there didn’t seem much point.

The voice-over kicked in and a woman with a honeyed smoker’s growl announced that Mr Monroe would have to wait to find out what would become of his hedge. The next item on the news began but I couldn’t concentrate. I was burning with a rare sense of indignation about Zac Monroe and his whale-shaped hedge.

This man was an English eccentric. I was sure of it. A walking, talking, protesting, air-guitaring, hedge-trimming English eccentric, which, now that I thought about it, was one of the few facets of Englishness I imagined most English people could agree on. Some might even cherish it. The English eccentric was part of the ‘England’ global brand and deserved to be talked about in the same rarefied terms as cups of tea, bad teeth and The Sex Pistols. Although Zac Monroe did not entirely look the part – he dressed conservatively and was perhaps too young to be a cardboard cut-out English eccentric – I was certain, in an instinctive way, that he was a modern-day incarnation of the English eccentric and he was being denied his eccentricity by Lambeth council.

His story seemed to confirm an otherwise vague hunch: the country I lived in was being wiped clean of its anomalies. It was being sanitized, its rough corners and illogical edges filed down, quietly, when nobody was looking, and it was only now, having witnessed via a television screen the plight of Zac Monroe, that I realized what this meant: the English eccentric was about to become an endangered species.

Everywhere I looked this hunch appeared to be confirmed. On the radio, on television, in newspapers and magazines, thudding about like spent cannonballs, were expressions like ‘the nanny state’, ‘clone towns’, ‘cultural globalisation’, ‘European standardization’, ‘risk-averse parenting’, ‘risk-resistant planning’, ‘health-and-safety-ocracy’, ‘it’s political correctness (gone mad)’, all of which seemed to point to the same conclusion: English society’s irregularities were being ironed out, one-by-one, and with this the eccentric was being fined,

imprisoned, or assimilated into the muddling median of everything I understood by the word 'normal'.

And yet, throughout the aleatory sprawl of English history there is a pantheon of men and women labelled eccentric during their lifetime who have gone on to be regarded by later generations as historically monumental pioneers endowed with originality and vision. From a distance, these people appeared to represent the crank-handle of English artistic and scientific advance.

The BBC's '100 Greatest Britons', compiled in 2002, is a cornucopia of individuals who have, at some point in their lives, been labelled eccentric or strange on account of their ideas before history devised a more magnanimous epitaph. As well as Sir Isaac Newton, you could say this of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, William Blake, Charles Darwin, Winston Churchill, Barnes Wallis, Alan Turing, Charles Babbage, David Bowie, John Peel, Queen Victoria, Lewis Carroll. And that's just the top fifty.

There are also those like Henry Cavendish who have not become household names but whose reputation has gone through a similar eccentric-to-pioneer metamorphosis following their death. Cavendish loathed conversation and all forms of human company, spending the last thirty years of his life in complete isolation. He spoke only when strictly necessary, and was known as an eccentric recluse. He was also the first person to identify the elemental make-up of water and discover two key principles of electricity – Coulomb's Law and Ohm's Law – long before Charles Coulomb and Georg Ohm hit on them; he is now considered a brilliant scientist.

It was at this point that Krentoma crept back into my life, uninvited, as it turned out. Since leaving Krentoma's village deep in the Amazon, I had clung on to the idea that every tribe or group of human beings in some way needs a resident eccentric to both ground them and inspire them. It seemed that human societies functioned better with an eccentric in their midst, just as the Panará appeared to operate more smoothly with Krentoma muddling about amongst them. But I had no way of proving this, so the idea had spent most of the last eight years hidden away as a pet theory, one that was allowed out only on special occasions.

Having seen what was happening to Zac Monro with his hedge, this idea morphed into something more precise. England was being shorn of its eccentrics, yet the English *needed* their eccentrics and functioned much better as a group with them.

Just after eleven o'clock that morning the idea had turned into a plan. I was so excited that I had to go for a walk to calm down before writing it down to see if it made any sense. The plan was simple: I would go on a journey to track down England's last

remaining eccentrics before they disappeared. I imagined them as a reclusive tribe facing extinction with me as the amateur anthropologist who would find them, catalogue them, document them, tag them if necessary, and then share their plight with the rest of the world. Before it was too late.

I felt a burning sense of purpose, as well as the thumping anticipation of a journey into the unknown.

The final part of the plan was that I would try and find the leader of this tribe, England's most eccentric man or woman. If no-one else did, surely they would know how to save the tribe from extinction.

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In 1859 John Stuart Mill wrote his defence of every human being's right to individual liberty, complete freedom of speech and, with a handful of exceptions, freedom of conduct. He called it *On Liberty*, and it became the founding text of twentieth-century Liberalism, with Mill installed as apostle saint. I remember studying it at school, though instead of reading *On Liberty* from start to finish, I picked at it reluctantly. For five weeks the print-out of this essay sat on my desk making me feel guilty every time I looked at it like a thickset fruitcake given to me by an elderly relative. I had neither the heart to throw it away, nor the drive to finish it off.

Re-reading *On Liberty* in full I was struck by Mill's nervousness about the English character and what direction it might take over the coming years. There is an undercurrent of looming, self-imposed catastrophe throughout. Mill, the most influential English political writer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, feared that society was beginning to worship custom over innovation, and compared England of the last hundred years to Ancient China, whose culture began to stagnate when it became obsessed with custom and its elite sneered at eccentricity.

It's easy to forget when reading *On Liberty* quite how much English society and 'Englishness' itself – still a fairly new concept – had changed during the century leading up to its publication. England in 1859 had come a long way from the licentiousness and relative debauchery of the late eighteenth-century Georgian era. That was a time before industrialisation, a more bawdy and carnal era when neither men nor women took regular baths, there were no sewers, and in any major metropolis you could see bulls being baited, cocks being thrown, criminals being executed, or you could slip with unembarrassed ease into a demi-monde of courtesans and harlots more brazen than anything imaginable in the mid-Victorian era.

By 1859 English society had extricated itself from an era that appeared to worship instinct over prudish civility. This is the context of John Stuart Mill writing, as if on a sandwich board suspended from his shoulders: ‘In this age, the mere example of nonconformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service. Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric.’

Mill went on: ‘That so few now dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of our time.’

*Our time.* Though written 148 years ago that sentence felt timeless, it could have been written at the beginning of the twenty-first century, perhaps as part of a newspaper editorial or the concluding line to a television documentary.

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Three months had passed since Zac Monro and his whale-shaped hedge had appeared on the local news. Nothing had happened. I had found no eccentrics.

This was partly because I was busy finishing other projects to clear a space for what had become, in my mind, *The Eccentrics Journey*; but, if I’m honest, my complete lack of progress had a lot to do with not knowing where to start.

My last long journey had involved the Middle East and had been easier to begin. I drove to Calais and took a left, more or less. This was different, and would involve some detective work. At the same time my resolve to find these eccentrics had, if anything, hardened. Everywhere I looked I saw proof of the need for someone to scour the country looking for English eccentrics and document their demise in order to save them from extinction. There was something verging on delusional, or at least obsessive, about the way every article I read or conversation I was a part of would now allude in some way to this decline of English eccentricity. It reminded me of times when I have been falling into or out of love, and how all the worst pop songs on the radio speak with startling force, compassion and emotional subtlety about what I am feeling. I’ll see it in adverts too. It’s in every newspaper or magazine. The whole world will suddenly be falling into or out of love, depending on which one I’m experiencing, eager to dole out advice or console, until the feeling passes.

As well as becoming convinced of the need to find these eccentrics, I had become fastidiously secretive about the journey ahead. After telling a handful of people what I was going to do I had become scared. On hearing the idea several had exclaimed,

“That’s brilliant!” or, “Why hasn’t anyone else thought of that?” and it was on hearing the second of these, a lot, that I started to keep it to myself. You see, in linking Krentoma and Zac Monro, I felt that I had made an original connection – not an epoch-defining, world-altering connection but an *original* one – and I prized that. The thought of having put two things together like this was beginning to make everything else feel trivial.

Making the connection was not enough. I needed a starting point, but again, where *do* you start a journey like this?