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Early, in the Evening a short story by Ian Watson

Foreword

"Early, in the Evening" was published in the April 1996 issue of *Asimov's Science Fiction*. It's a story which occurred to me all of a sudden when a friend said to me, "So I'll see you early evening, then," and I thought to myself: but the evening *isn't* early, it's fairly late on in the day. Stories quite often occur to me this way, ordinary reality turning inside out and upside down, then I let the story tell itself, taking off into whatever far region it chooses, in this case the whole history of the world and human evolution reversed within less than 3000 words, but with a sense of place and characters (I hope). In *Consciousness Explained* (consciousness being a bit of an obsession of mine) Daniel Dennett suggests that we are all fictional characters, telling ourselves an ongoing narrative which constructs our life and establishes who we are. Our existence depends on the persistence of narrative. Consciousness is the product, not the source, of stories. Furthermore, words fight it out within us for a chance of expression. We do not so much choose our words; within contextual constraints the words choose themselves. So, far from being something non-essential -- mere entertainment -- the creation and consumption of stories is rooted deep in our very existence and consciousness. In "Early, in the Evening" that consciousness is progressively lost as our story un-tells itself.

This is all rationalisation after the event. The story came first, and told itself to me as the characters and ideas deployed themselves, each giving rise to the other. And maybe the story has a different meaning. Maybe it muses about death.

Nor did I quite intend, when I started writing these words, that this would be what I would say about the story.

Early, in the Evening

Even early in the morning St Thomas's Church consisted of a nave and chancel. However, Father Hopkins waited until almost noon before delivering his Snowdrop Sermon. By then the church had undergone numerous extensions and renovations. A south aisle had been added, followed by a north aisle. The chancel had been rebuilt. Then a tower had arisen -- otherwise how could Hopkins have rung a bell to summon his flock? North doorway and chancel arch were remodelled. A south porch was added. Windows became larger as the sun rose higher. Buttresses strengthened the walls.

A substantial setting for his sermon!

From the pulpit Hopkins proclaimed to his congregation: "Snowdrops push up spears through iron soil. They enter a world which is, as yet, so scantily populated. There's so much free space wherein to be the first to flower, thus the first to die.

"What does the snowdrop know of the riot of Summer?" he preached. "What does it know of the subsequent heat? Would that hot riot of the mid-months be a snowdrop's idea of hell? Or does the snowdrop inhabit an eternally recurring hell of vacant cold?

"How time-bound is the snowdrop, never to know the full cycle of the year in the way that people perceive a full year -- !" He faltered, perplexed by which tense to adopt. "In the way that people *used* to perceive..."

Those in the congregation -- the Lucases and the Randalls, the Smiths and the Bakers and the Baxters and others -- were tired from their morning's toil. Since it would be another five hours or so until the development of radio, let alone television, Hopkins was their consolation, even if the bleak cheer which he offered lacked entire conviction.

"*Used* to perceive," Hopkins repeated. "Time has betrayed the Earth, and all thereon who dwell -- who evolved here throughout millions of years --"

Maybe it was a little early in the day for talk of evolution. Yet several in his audience nodded understandingly.

Jonathon and Margaret Lucas, the eleven years old twins, fidgeted. Jonathon complained to his father Richard: "Why do I have to gather

muck every morning?"

Margaret pestered her mother Elisabeth: "Why do I have to *weed* every day?"

Jonathon dug his sister in the ribs. "That's just in the mornings, stupid."

"I'm not stupid! I'll be doing better than you in school this afternoon."

"Why do we have to go to school, Dad? What's the use?"

"Would you rather spend all day collecting dung?" Richard whispered grimly.

"How could I spend all day?" asked the boy with irksome logic. "There's no muck left lying about later on."

"In that case," retorted his father, "you must collect muck while it's available."

"It's *shitty*."

"Watch your tongue! You just gather those droppings to scatter on the fallows after they've been ploughed. That's your task, Son. We all have tasks."

"We needn't -- "

Up in the pulpit, which was still carved of stone, Father Hopkins blinked. Unaided as yet by spectacles, he peered towards the box-pew which the Lucases were sharing with the Baxters.

"Sufficient unto the hour is the toil thereof!" he called out. "Believe me, lad. All of you harken to me: our mundane lives are so much more *comprehensive* now than ever they were before. Our lives are so much more extensive, even universal, by the grace of Gaea. Each day we embrace such a gamut of experiences. What does the snowdrop know of such rich diversity, such a varying pageant? Isn't this how we should view our plight?"

Was Hopkins the same priest as once he had been, before the treason of

time? Hopkins retained an oratorical bent, as well as a duty of care. However, he had abandoned all Christian theology. Jesus and God the Father and the Holy Ghost were irrelevant to what had occurred. Gaea, on the other hand, might be germane.

A few days earlier Hopkins had attempted to explain how and why this might be.

"Evolution," he had declared, "is undergoing a strange recapitulation. Do I mean evolution as such? Forgive me, that is silly talk! It is our *history* which is undergoing recapitulation day by day. Our recent social history in all its circumstances." Hopkins had been a leading light of the local Historical Society, and indeed come evening-time he still was.

"Throughout history," he confided, "the *concept* of God evolved. It is in this sense I suggest that God might well now be viewed, ahem, as devolving into Gaea -- as a more primitive power of seasons and crops reasserts Herself. Should we not find this suggestive? As for the *miraculous* nature of what besets us, alas, sophisticated theology outgrew the magical -- "

"Mummy, why do I need to spend the mornings weeding the same old weeds? Why can't we sleep in and get up late? Why can't we wait till we can drive to the supermarket -- ?"

In the morning it was always early. Roughly eight hundred years early. In the morning the Lucas's home was a thatched hovel of mud-and-wattle. So were most of the other devolved houses each behind fence or hedge, though the stockaded Manor with its ox-stalls and barns and buttery was of sturdy stone.

Fields of long narrow strips extended to the great woodland where pigs foraged. Sheep and cattle grazed the common meadow. Geese honked around the fish ponds.

Mornings could be an optimistic time for many souls. People were full of expectation for later in the day, though first there was hard labour. Ewes to milk. Butter to churn. Fallows to plough, manure to scatter. Wood to cut.

Garden plots of leeks and onions and garlic and mint and parsley to weed and tend.

Might the Lucas family not simply laze around and wait until evening when their house was of bricks and mortar with a car parked in the driveway? Likewise the Smiths and Baxters, the Bakers and the Randalls?

Naturally Richard and Elisabeth had discussed this when the kids were finally watching television.

Children did not experience to the same degree as adults the necessity to perform -- to involve oneself fully and methodically in the sequence of each day. Partly the grown-ups were succumbing to group pressure. Yet there was also a personal, almost ontological aspect, powerfully superstitious.

"If we don't all follow the sequence," Richard had said, "then the sequence mightn't carry us along with it."

"We might miss out on the results," agreed Elisabeth.

Of course everyone lived for the results. The freezer food, the microwave oven, the phone, the soft bed -- which, come the morning, would once again be a sack stuffed with straw.

In the afternoons industrialisation occurred. In its own way industry was dirty and fatiguing. Yet it augured a progressively neater and easier world. Where the strip-fields and woodland had once been, would stand estates of houses and zones of light industry. Newspapers would appear around four o'clock. By six o'clock there was radio; by six-thirty, television.

And so many more people too! What had been a large village would have grown into a town. The Lucases would be able to invite their closest friends Paul and Sally Devizes over.

Closest friends, nearest neighbours -- though only later in the day. Paul and Sally did not share the earlier hours with the Lucases. A science programme on television had hypothesised that small disconnected bubbles of existence progressively combined into bigger bubbles which all finally merged. The past had frothed; the past had foamed. All of those earlier micro-bubbles were synchronous in some higher dimension. They shared the same historical past. Yet in ordinary dimensionality the

occupants simply did not interact.

Thus there was no contradiction in shared experience: of strip-fields and hovels, of common meadow and cattle, of work and woodland, of the rutted muddy tracks. Nonetheless, each bubble remained a world unto itself until the bubbles joined and people were reunited with one another -- as well as with their real homes and their cars and their electronics.

While the Lucases and the Devizes had been watching that science show about time-bubbles in Richard and Elisabeth's lounge, Jonathon and Margaret were horsing around upstairs with Paul and Sally's lad Philip. The kids were out of the way.

Paul Devizes joked to Richard, "Suppose I was to stay here tonight? Suppose you were to sleep at our place, Rich! Tomorrow morning would I be in your bubble, and would you be in mine? Until the evening came!"

"That reminds me of some Dylan song," said Sally.

Elisabeth frowned. "Father Hopkins wouldn't approve."

"From what you say," hinted Paul, "your Father Hopkins is getting into paganism."

"He's probably at that history club in town right now," said Sally -- as though maybe they should all drive into the centre to consult the priest on the etiquette of Paul's suggestion. She raised an eyebrow teasingly, but Elisabeth burst into tears. Richard's wife shook with sobs.

She whimpered. "I can't stand it much longer."

Richard hastened to comfort her with hugs.

"Can anyone? We pretend that life can be normal. At least in the evenings! Of course it isn't. What else can we do?"

"Evenings are for enjoyment," Sally said briskly. "They have to be, or else we'd go crazy. Don't go crazy on us, Liz. It'll be bad for the kids."

Paul grimaced. "We oughtn't to have watched that wretched programme. What can those experts tell us?"

What indeed?

Newspapers appeared when the technology and appropriate buildings and delivery vans emerged. Radio began to broadcast as civilisation advanced - followed by television stations and aerials and sets... The media never offered any really new enlightenment. With minor variations, today was always the same ultimate day. Editorials and broadcasts spoke of the Flux, the Collapse of the Continuum. In spite of a definite pressure to conform to one's surroundings, the present day wasn't merely a repeat of the previous day. Else, how would anyone be aware of a succession of days? Aware, one certainly was.

Today Father Hopkins has delivered his snowdrop sermon. Tomorrow he was perfectly free to chose a different theme. For their part, radio and television might discuss a space-time anomaly, or of the influence of a cosmic string from the dawn of the universe, or phenomenological anamnesis.

Tomorrow a riot might erupt in the medieval village or in the modern town. A rape or a murder might blemish the day. En route to the supermarket in the retail park a car crash might claim a life. If someone died, they weren't restored to life the following day. If someone broke a leg, they wouldn't be walking around for a while.

Even so, one sensed that the day which followed the present day was not exactly a *tomorrow*. The next day, and the day after that, lacked futurity. The stream of time had encountered some barrier which forced chronology backwards. Richard and Paul, and Elisabeth and Sally, and the kids too, were farm labourers in the mornings. In the afternoons they were workers in early industry in the local textile mill -- till it was time for the kids to go to school, till it was time for Richard to become a local government officer in charge of planning applications, and for Paul to become a mortgage broker. Surprisingly, some people were still trying to move house -- as if thus they might ease their medieval duties or finesse a finer hovel wherein to awaken in the mornings.

Evenings, as Sally had insisted, were for fun. Some people chose to view prospective new homes at bargain prices. A number of people made the effort to drive to the city thirty miles away, to return -- or not, as the case might be -- before the drowsiness began at around eleven o'clock.

That inevitable drowsiness! As the long day -- the eight hundred year day -

- decayed, preliminary to the crumbling of the present, so did people begin to slumber, whether they wished to or not. Sleep softly; and wake hard.

If some scientist in a laboratory had contrived to remain conscious till past midnight, doped with amphetamines and surrounded by bright lights and bells and gongs, would he or she perhaps have experienced the onset of *sheer nothingness*? In the absence of futurity, what else could she or he possibly apprehend? Only nullity, vacancy, utter abeyance, absence of all context.

No news report spoke of any such attempt. In the absence of futurity, news could hardly electrify an audience. Events could never develop much forward momentum. Regional wars and politics had stalled. Also, stock exchange trading. Manufacturing continued. Goods produced during the industrial revolution regularly mutated into modern merchandise. Newsworthy disasters still occurred. A flood in Bangladesh. A train crash in Japan. Oil tankers colliding in the Gulf.

Towards bedtime the night before, Richard had received a crank phone call. Some woman in town did not devote her evenings to leisure but to cold-calling at random to confide her own theory about the breakdown of time. According to the voice on the phone, the cycle of reincarnation had collapsed due to the increase in world population in the late twentieth century. The dead could only be reincarnated as *themselves* at an earlier stage in their own pre-existence. Everyone who experienced *the phenomenon* was actually dead. Didn't he realise this? The woman's logic had eluded Richard, so he had put the phone down.

Elisabeth soon stopped fretting. Richard glanced at his watch. A few more blithe hours remained. Once Paul and Sally had departed homeward, and after the twins were in bed, perhaps he and his wife might make love.

What if Elisabeth became pregnant? Could a baby ever grow in her womb and be born after another two hundred and seventy recapitulative days? Would such a newcomer be born in a modern hospital or in a medieval hut?

Had *any* babies been born recently? Father Hopkins might know. Richard found within himself no desire to ask the priest. Nor, any longer, did he find desire itself.

From the kitchen he fetched a final chilled bottle of the dry Muscadet

which the friends favoured. Tomorrow evening, he must stop by the supermarket to restock.

"Here's to another day," he proposed.

"Do you remember ice-boxes?" Richard asked Beth in their home of mud and wattle as two candle stubs burned low. He freed the skirt of his tunic from his belt so as to hide the twice-darned tops of hose tied to his waist-band. "Do you remember moving pictures from far away in a box with a glass front? Do you remember voices from a box?"

His wife, in her ankle-length skirt and large apron, frowned in the flickery gloom. "Why we wasting the candles, Rich?"

Would she pull the caul from her head and let down her braids while he could still behold her?

"Do you remember *machines*?" he persisted.

"Is this another of your visions?" she asked dolefully. "Maybe you ought to speak to the monk instead of to me."

"What were we doing this morning, Beth?"

Anxiety haunted her.

"Our tribe," she mumbled. "We was hiding from those soldiers of Rome. Your face was daubed with blue. Life's much better these days."

"That was at noontime, Beth. What were we doing earlier?"

Surely they had worn skins and chipped flints to fix to trimmed poles, around a fire in a cave mouth in the cold? Surely the shaman, who was now the monk, had imparted a vision of carts and hayricks?

"We ought to be abed, Rich!"

In the evening, as the light died, fire was finally tamed. The flash from the

sky which had burned the pine tree re-awoke from embers to set piled branches ablaze and banish the hungry bear.

The shaman chanted about light being reborn with the dawn. What was that *dawn* -- which those of the tribe could only recall in fleeting dreamlike spasms? Earlier in the day surely they had shared the life of some small hairy animal which was not their totem animal, the huge-horned elk. They had surely themselves been beasts.

"Lis-ba!" Dik demanded of his wizened mate. "Wa Ma?"

He wanted to know where was their child of countless summers, now herself swollen with child. Dik's last few rotting teeth were aching. Soon he would be the oldest man around.

In the evening, the biped eventually achieved sentience. Its mind was confused by images of running on all fours.

As the moon arose the big-eyed lemur awoke. It gulped the warm sweet air. How clearly it could see compared with its disappearing dream of being underwater. The lemur climbed a branch, aspiring to the bleached light. It chattered to itself -- "Dik, dik, dik!" Somehow it found the noise comforting.

A thought almost crystallised: an awareness of self. But oh the mesmerism of the moon. Self-consciousness submerged, as if tropic waters had risen to drown the forest.

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