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“Dead Eye”

We’d never seen anyone throw a ball like that. Blew the bails off the cricket stumps from a full hundred yards. Easy. No fluke. He did it again and again then walked away bored. He could do it for fun and could have done it all day long if he had wanted to. He was just a kid. If they could have got him to behave, the teachers would have had a national talent on their hands for sure. We were privileged, as he usually didn’t join in games unless he felt like it. Teachers tried to get him involved in all sorts of sports. Sadly, as he was hardly ever there and not remotely bothered about his education, the system never really had much chance with him.

I remember him playing in the woods with us once one summer. He just appeared randomly one day and casually just joined in, as he did. Dark-haired, with darker eyelashes, freckled and always a little scruffy; he had a type of cult status even at his tender age. He was always just a little too arrogant to be likeable but we let him join in with our games if he ever felt like it. We knew little about his family. This boy didn’t seem to have a permanent group of friends but, due to his skills, was never short of company when he wanted it.

In those woods, we were throwing all sorts of things at each other all that day and went home filthy, as kids did back then. I remember him picking some little fishing weights from his pocket. We all knew what he could do but he was getting better and better every time we saw him. Amazingly, while we were sat talking, he took a rook out of a tree quite easily. Fair enough, but shortly after that he cruelly hit one of them in mid-flight, and as hard as any catapult. Like I said, we had never seen anything like it. Another time, we saw him practicing his trade alone on the beach. It was, for him a typically solitary self-taught training session. Who could he practice with? He had carefully made a tall pile of smooth flat stones, and then went about demolishing it with projected pebbles from carefully paced positions farther and farther out, as if daring himself to test the limits of his own developing talent further with each subsequent throw. He took his time. The routine involved him standing casually, one leg a shoulder’s width in front of the other in line with the target, then staring intently with one eye almost closed,

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before raising his right arm. Some of the shots from way off curved dramatically inwards before splattering the pile of rocks in all directions with a piercingly clean crack. Sometimes it took two throws to completely destroy all traces of the pile but they never seemed to miss. As if drawn in magnetically from their trajectory, the stones hit home like this boy could read the very wind itself. We rarely ever used his real name. Everyone called him "Dead-Eye" for obvious reasons.

When we were about 13 years old, and before we realised someone was missing, he must have left our school and moved elsewhere as we never really saw much of him again. We had other things to do at that age and forgot all about "Dead-Eye". All of us meet memorable kids at school but often soon forget about them after we leave those days behind to get on with our own emerging lives. Occasionally they come back into our mind when we least expect it. Rather than bump into him in some supermarket twenty years later, in the case of Dead Eye, he would bizarrely turn up again in just about as big a way as was possible.

All of a sudden, he was in a news story that was to receive massive round-the clock world media coverage. Although the story had been running for a day or so before I had picked up on it, I soon found myself engrossed in remembering those supposedly innocent childhood days sat killing summer holiday time with this small freckled kid. I recognised his face instantly in the newspapers and on TV. As always in these cases, they had got hold of our school class photo.

There had been an assassination. It was a big one this time. Al-Sadir, an influential Al-Q'aeda leader had been audaciously "taken out" on live television right in front of hundreds of his own supporters. In the war against terror, it was long overdue. The American President could hardly contain his jubilation and he visibly beamed at press conferences.

Al-Sadir had been the scourge of US anti-terror efforts for five years. Despite the very best efforts of the US and UK governments, Al-Sadir managed to arrogantly spin the media even here in the West with his smug weekly rogue Satellite TV broadcasts. Using the very latest technology the USA spent millions trying to trace, jam and destroy these propaganda signals to no avail. There was always at least one TV channel that managed to broadcast them. The leader bragged about his group's successful acts of terror carried out against the US "Leviathan", and taunted the West with talk of their intended future targets. Al-Sadir was a digital-age contemporary of Lord Haw Haw. Something just had to be done.

According to media sources, it seemed that a young man with a remarkable skill had drifted into the army some time in his twenties. A

unique talent at baseball, juggling and darts throwing had resulted in him being quickly noticed. Special Forces training soon followed with both the UK and US military. Then came much work on his appearance so he could blend into undercover operations. Apparently he had been specially trained as an assassin for covert counter-terror situations where no one else could ever get. The press went on to speculate about his background. They knew very little. They tried to suggest a previous circus family background in knife throwing and tried to tie the story in with several high-profile rebel leaders who had been mysteriously “taken-out” in the last few years. This of course was quite plausible. Behind the headlines, I actually knew what this man could do.

Al-Sadir, given his growing influence in the world stage was always surrounded by a massive security operation and had several doubles. His exact locations and movements between the broadcasts were kept very secret. Every member of his frenzied adoring crowd of supporters was frisked thoroughly before their leader would appear in front of them.

“Dead-Eye” didn’t need a knife. He didn’t need a rifle, pistol or grenade. He didn’t need to have explosives strapped around his body. “Dead-Eye” only needed a stone. They could have searched him all day long for all he cared. No metal detector would ever bleep. They wouldn’t find anything of interest on him. His deadly weapon could be easily smuggled, if necessary, in something like a piece of bread. In this dry, dusty and stony environment, he could have held the murder weapon in his hand for everyone to see.

His coaching had been extensive. “Dead-Eye” knew exactly where to aim on the back of his target’s head to get the correct brain injury. Casual as ever, he knew he wouldn’t get the chance for a second throw, but was always confident he would not need one. He was sure about this one. If “Dead-Eye’s” impact was two centimetres off his intended position, he would have been disappointed. He had been trained. Al-Sadir must not be allowed to recover from this injury. “Kill him or vegetate him, then get out quietly” was his brief. Special Forces had tried to get other assassins close to this guy before but had never got anyone near. It was a rare opportunity.

Arriving at the scene early, he blended in without a problem. Weapon selection had been some days before. Confidently and arrogantly, “Dead-Eye” fingered his stone in his pocket for some time. He spiralled it between his thumb and the first two fingers of his right hand to get the most comfortable grip. He felt the weight again and again. The stone was warm and a little moist. There was a lot of money in this one. He casually looked around to finalise his escape route. The assassin had positioned himself high

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on a wall at the back of the crowd. He then held his arms behind his head for about ten minutes so no one would notice an arm being raised immediately before the despatch. He would be all right. There would be no smoke, no recoil and no shot noise. There never was. His biggest danger was of him being seen acting suspiciously. The pace of the speech increased. Everyone's eyes were tunnelled on Al-Sadir, hanging on to his every word.

Al-Sadir turned momentarily away from the crowd. The time had come.

The stone splattered quietly into the rear of his head. The leader fell silently to his knees. From the moment that stone left Dead-Eye's fingers it was a winner. Weighted beautifully, there was just the right measured spin on that one. Dead-Eye instantly turned in the split second of the red liquid impact on Al-Sadir's skull. It was a good clean hit. The assassin slowly levered both his legs over the wall while stretching both arms out high as if continuing a yawn. Hardly anyone had realised that Al-Sadir was now about to die of brain injuries. Thinking that he had stumbled on the camera wire, people carried on watching oblivious. The leader did not get back to his feet. The leader was in big trouble.

Supporters ran to surround the jerking body of Al-Sadir. Soon, the crowd was panicking. Rifles were being fired. The TV cameras were hastily turned away from their leader. Screams began to ring out. Dead-Eye merged stealthily into the background and slowly, step-by-step, was moving away from his place of work. He had begun thoughts even of his next job.

A foot was across his shins. A stick was in his back. Hands were around his throat. He was being dragged toward the guards.

Someone had seen.

The broadcasts began again the next day. Al-Sadir was portrayed as a martyr. Successors were appointed. Much was made that the assassin had been captured alive. The trial was delayed to give the Western newspapers enough time for Dead-Eye's bruised prisoner photograph to reach the breakfast table of every household.

His brutal interrogation and subsequent trial was deliberately televised. The scenes were played out live on Satellite television into every UK and USA home over the following few days. People were transfixed. Dead-Eye was to be used in propaganda against the West and an example was to be made of him. This terror group were ironically now getting more airtime than ever. With the jerkily handheld cameras that often focused closely on his blackened face, came the moment I recognised his dark hair, eyes and freckles once again and thought back to the lonely boy on the beach. The

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footage was interspersed with “highlights” of Al-Sadir’s best speeches. It was not a long trial.

Under their law, the punishment was deemed to fit the crime. The sentence was to be the death penalty. The execution itself was to be broadcast live in front of the cameras.

It was to be death by stoning.

Steve Morris

“Lightning Strikes Twice”

People sometimes wondered what ever happened to Julian Vilette the singer. Little enough was known of the star before his fame. Even less was known about his subsequent ordinary life under his even more ordinary name of Malcolm Davies. What we did all know about him, however, was that he was the man behind that massive memorable 70s disco hit “Lightning Strikes Twice”. Everyone who had been on holiday anywhere that summer knew that one. The bars and nightclubs were full of it and even the kids loved it. There was no avoiding the risqué “Lightning” with its shallow chauvinistic lyric about one man’s conquests. It became inseparably synonymous with that long hot August.

Julian Vilette paraded his dance on Top of the Pops dressed in leather trousers, long brown leather trench coat and his almost-as-long hair. The song was huge for its short life span. It was his first and only hit record. Like so many other singers with massive hits that had become far too massive for their own good; soon after, he disappeared into thin air. For those disposable artists, their first song gets so very big that no matter how much better the follow-up song was, it would always be seen as an anti-climax. Such was the success of “Lightning Strikes Twice” that Julian Vilette was advised to not even bother trying to record a follow-up single. According to the press articles of the time, he didn’t need to. They said that he was already mega-rich and had wine, women, sports cars and a life of luxury ahead of him. Or at least so people were led to believe. For Malcolm Davies however, none of this was actually true. It was all hype released by the record company at the time. Someone had obviously made money out of “Lightning” but it wasn’t him. He had a tiny royalty on a “one record” deal and very little else. Singles themselves never made a lot in those days. The real money was made with albums and tours. After his chart success, he was not a rich man; he owned neither mansion, nor sports cars, had no family and was not particularly happy. Relationships were difficult to form for Malcolm because women were reluctant to trust him; such was his reputation from the song. Oh yes, he had plenty of offers at that time. However, they were always from the wrong type of woman for the church-

going Malcolm. They were from those types of women that he always disliked. Judging by the lyric of "Lightning", those particular women would have been ideal for Julian Villette. He thought he had found some happiness briefly. He set his heart on only one girl called Mary who was working for the record company helping to promote the single during a Spanish tour that summer. All sunglasses, scarves, tied-back long hair and safari shorts; Mary was an outstanding example of the very best seventies jet-set glamour. She was the one for him and he fell in love all too quickly. Mary would not have been out of place alongside any stylist celebrity of the time. She was instantly attracted by Malcolm and spent time working closely with him but was soon put off by all his female attention and by the continually intrusive press stories surrounding the supposed antics of his alter ego. No matter how much he tried to persuade her of his previous church-going background, she was convinced that he actually was a Julian Villette character. He took Mary's rejection very seriously and it was to remain deeply within him. He became bitter about relationships and decided to give up on them.

Twenty-five years down the line and things were not much different. Malcolm's life was not particularly much of one. He had moved around the country, being unable to settle anywhere. Everything in life was always going to be an anti-climax after his short burst of fame all those years ago. He was an untidy man who lived in an even untidier flat. His neighbours neither knew him, nor knew of him nor cared to know of him.

Drink was Malcolm's recurrent problem in those years afterwards. He kept quiet about his past life and tried to forget it. He now lived and worked in his own quiet routine as a warehouseman in a large supermarket. This, together with the odd small royalty cheque helped to pay the bills. Apparently Malcolm had "signed away" the rights to the song so anyone could cover it if they should wish to. He never actually remembered doing that but it explained why he was unable to stop "Talent-less morons" regularly destroying the song on piped musak CDs. However, he would still receive a small royalty from each CD sold so it wasn't totally a bad thing.

Occasionally the song was used on a few of those retro compilation albums. Particularly annoying was when some exceptionally bland piped supermarket singer had completely murdered the song on a summer CD alongside other seventies' "novelty" songs. One of these was piped into the supermarket ad nauseum throughout all of last July and August so he had to

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repeatedly endure “the thing” during his work. There was no escaping it. Malcolm even tried to change to the night shift to avoid having to listen to it. He decided that he had always hated “Lightning Strikes Twice”.

Then came a Saturday morning with a phone call from a representative from a record company. “I’ve been trying to track you down for ages Mr Davies...You still got that hair, by the way?..... Anyway, listen...you don’t keep up with the charts much these days do you?” the record company guy assumed rather than asked. “Well then, you won’t have heard the news. Did you know that the girl-group Buzz-Whack have sampled your song on a track on their new album? The track itself was released as a single on Monday and I’ll tell you- the kids just can’t get enough... I’ll be in touch.”

The best part of the riff had been sped up, and played under a bombastic synth-loop that worked an absolute treat. Malcolm found it difficult to admit, but he actually really liked it. They had really improved the song. Also the royalties would come in very useful. He then started listening to the radio again! At work, he tapped his feet when he heard Buzz-Whack on a lorry’s radio. He untied his ponytail and washed his hair.

A couple of weeks later the record company guy was on the phone again. “Listen...any chance of sorting yourself out Mr Davies? Got any of that old gear? Everyone’s asking for you....‘What happened to Villette?’ is all we’re getting. I’m telling you... if we re-release it as a single in the next month or so we’re minted....It’ll need a little re-mixing for the current market, mind.”

Malcolm had a feeling that he had little choice in the matter. The money would come in useful. Record deals were different nowadays. The clothes were all rotted away or else previously thrown away. The long hair was fortunately all still there but needed dying. Re-learning the words wasn’t difficult. He had been trying to forget them for twenty-five years. Cigarettes had taken their toll on his voice but apparently he would only have to mime the song live.

He was surprised how quickly the CD took to record, mix and produce. It soon began to get mainstream airplay and the press were gathering. This time he got a lawyer to check through the record contract.

Within a month he had gone from Saturday mornings watching TV lying in bed to Saturday mornings in a TV studio. He was in his element. As Malcolm became Julian Villette once more, his confidence returned. He looked everyone in the eye. He walked and talked differently. He began to notice women and they began to notice him. The rehearsal tension, the smells from the make-up and the heat from the studio lights all combined to a magic instant when it was summer 1978 all over again. Villette was the centre of the world.

A confectionary company simultaneously began using the song as a soundtrack to a ubiquitous TV campaign. He couldn't lose.

As "Lightning" began to rise in the charts Malcolm found that he was invited out most nights of the week. He met many new people. This time he was generally more wary and avoided any women even remotely connected to the music industry.

Malcolm, perhaps unusually for a pop star, began to re-attend Church events. This was something he had not done for a long time. People obviously knew who he was but he modestly avoided talking about Lightning. This was to be a new beginning for him. He realised that he should have done this all before.

He soon became attracted to a travel agent called Sheila. She was a similar age to Malcolm. Apparently she had once been a fashion model. It was the overall way that she carried herself that caught Malcolm's attention quickly. He imagined that she must have really been something special in "her day". She admitted that she didn't actually remember the first time that the record was in the charts. That was good. The future was all that mattered. Malcolm considered his advancing years, his previously wasted opportunities and his second chance for happiness and resolved to make pro-active attempts to find love. He pursued Sheila far too quickly alas. Initially, the bohemian Malcolm charmed the elegant spinster. She admitted that he had "a lot more about him" than other men who she had met. However, after a few weeks she became standoffish.

"Malcolm, I was around at my mother's house last weekend," she said, on the phone "They were clearing out the loft. There were these old newspapers from way back. There was a double spread on Julian Vilette. Then in this Sunday's paper there was an article about you and those girls from Buzz-Whack. I'm afraid I can't see you any more. Just how many conquests have there been in the last twenty-five years?"