

*'We are all in a post-hypnotic trance  
induced in early infancy'*

– R. D. Laing

*'Is all that we see or seem  
But a dream within a dream?'*

– Edgar Allan Poe

*'History doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes.'*

– Mark Twain



0.4

MIKE LANCASTER

EGMONT

# EGMONT

*We bring stories to life*

0.4 first published in Great Britain 2011  
by Egmont UK Limited  
239 Kensington High Street  
London W8 6SA

Text copyright © Mike Lancaster 2011

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

ISBN 978 1 4052 5304 8

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British  
Library

Typeset by Avon DataSet Ltd, Bidford on Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by the CPI Group

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by  
any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording  
or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher and  
copyright owner.

To the girl in Cromwell that  
I fell in love with and  
whom I am proud to call my wife



# Contents

Editor's Note	01
Tape One Side One	03
Tape One Side Two	45
Tape Two Side One	85
Tape Two Side Two	125
Tape Three Side One	161
Tape Three Side Two	215
Afterword	269





# **WARNING**

THIS DATA STORAGE UNIT, OR 'BOOK', HAS BEEN DESIGNED TO REPROGRAM THE HUMAN BRAIN, ALLOWING IT TO REPLICATE THE LOST ART THAT WAS ONCE CALLED 'READING'. IT IS A SIMPLE ADJUSTMENT AND THERE WILL BE NO NEGATIVE OR HARMFUL EFFECTS FROM THIS PROCESS.

## **WHAT YOU ARE DOING: 'READING' EXPLAINED**

EACH SHEET IS INDELIBLY PRINTED WITH INFORMATION AND THE SHEETS ARE VISUALLY SCANNED FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, AND FROM TOP TO BOTTOM.

THIS SCANNED INFORMATION IS PASSED THROUGH THE VISUAL CORTEX DIRECTLY INTO THE BRAIN WHERE IT CAN THEN BE ACCESSED, JUST LIKE ANY OTHER DATA.



## Editor's Note

*When Danny Birnie told us that he had hypnotised his sister we all thought he was mad.*

*Or lying.*

*Or both.*

These are the words that begin the spoken narrative of Kyle Straker. It's a story that many have heard *about*, but few have had the opportunity to *hear* for themselves. It is both a piece of oral history from a time we are largely unfamiliar with – the early twenty-first century – and a tale with dark depths, which, if true, has important lessons for us all to take away from it.

For those unfamiliar with the history of the Kyle Straker tapes, a brief recap might be helpful. The tapes were discovered two years ago, in the understair cupboard of a house in the small Cambridgeshire village of Millgrove. The first tape was labelled 'Dire Straits'.

Luckily the finder was an antique music enthusiast, who had the necessary analogue equipment to play back the tapes, otherwise the story of Kyle Straker would have been condemned to the dustbin of lost history.

After discovering their true contents, the tapes were passed on to the authorities. They have been the subject of much controversy and debate ever since.

The peculiar format that you are holding – a book – was still the dominant form of information storage at the time the tapes were made. There is a reason why I insisted on this archaic format which will, I hope, become apparent as the narrative progresses.

If the story you are about to read is true, then this work is respectfully dedicated to the 0.4.

Mike A. Lancaster,  
Editor



# TAPE ONE SIDE ONE

*... is this thing on?*

*Testing, testing.*

*One two. One two. Two.*

*Ha. You know those roadies who get up on stage and test all the band's gear before a gig? And they do all that 'testing testing one two one two' stuff into the microphones, to make sure they'll work when the singer finally takes the stage. Well, Simon once said that the reason they said 'one two one two' was because roadies couldn't count to three.*

*Made me laugh, but I guess you had to be there.*

*Anyway – how can you tell if these things are even working?*

*I mean, low-tech or what?*

*Still, of course it's low tech, it's a tape recorder. An old and battered relic of a time before digital storage and CDs; iPods and MP3s; memory sticks and SD cards.*

*At least it works. I wasn't sure it would, it had been abandoned and left to rot in the cupboard under the stairs.*

*I kinda know how it feels.*

*Anyway, the tape player is old – it was made by Amstrad, the company started by that rude bloke off The Apprentice. Mum used to love that show. Even went through a phase of saying 'You're fired' for a while when we did something stupid or naughty.*

*Funny the things you miss.*

**NOTE – *The Apprentice***

What was known – ironically – as 'reality TV'. Entwistle in his paper 'Manufacturing Nothing: Light Entertainment' writes: 'Afraid to see the world around them as a larger picture, people instead reduced their views of the world to the tiny, artificial windows they called "reality TV". What is certain, however, is that reality played little or no part in such programmes.'

*Oh well. I'd better get on with putting this on to tape; the story I have come back home to record. I've been making*

*notes for weeks, jotting down the things I remember, the conversations, the impressions I had at the time, just so I could do this. Make this tape. Tell you these things in my own voice.*

*I'm doing it in the hope that someone will listen and realise that everything has changed.*

*Changed forever.*

*That the world they are living in is not the one it has always been. That there are a few of us left who can remember the way things were – the way they were meant to be.*

*Looking back is easy, but there's a temptation to fill in blanks. I'm going to try to tell it as it happened to me, all in the right order and everything, without filling in any of the stuff I learned later. That's why my notes are going to be important.*

*I've worked it through in my head and reckon that tenses are going to be a problem; you know, whether 'has' and 'is' should be 'had' and 'was', but the first set sounds better in my head because it's how things were at the time, and not how they are now.*

*If that makes sense.*

*My English teacher would probably throw a fit, but then he's probably changed too, and it's my story anyway, so I'll tell it the way that feels natural, the way that feels right.*

*I even know the way the story starts, the very moment it all started to change. The crazy thing that Danny said, that summer afternoon. And, yes, Dad, I'm taping over one of your Dire Straits albums. Something you should have done a long time ago.*



# 01

When Danny Birnie told us that he had hypnotised his sister we all thought he was mad.

Or lying.

Or both.

The sister in question is a couple of years older than him and never struck me as the kind of girl who'd fall for any of Danny's nonsense.

She had to be used to it.

She lived with him.

So she had seen his short-lived preoccupations with stamp collecting, and the difficult withdrawal from his Pokémon addiction. She was even used to his new obsession with becoming the next David Blaine, and the hours he spent practising with packs of cards.

She always struck me as the kind of girl who's going to be a star. Some people are just like that. You know that they

will, as my grandad used to say, *land butter-side-up*.

There was no way that Danny – who, no matter how hard he tried, would always end up *butter-side-down* – could have done what he had told us he had.

Danny's face was pale and thin, with dark semicircles under each eye, and his hair was a dirty brown colour, tousled on top. He was small for his age. Heck, it was my age too – and that's fifteen and a half, thanks for asking – and I was almost a full head taller than him. And he seemed to exaggerate that smallness by hunching his shoulders and bending his back.

'You should have seen it,' he said, his eyes sparkling with excitement. 'It actually worked. I mean, I knew it *could* work, but still, I didn't really think it *would*.'

He ignored our disbelieving looks.

'I got her to relax. And I guided her into a hypnotic state. I didn't even need to say "sleep" like they do on the telly. As I relaxed her, her eyes closed and her body went . . . sort of floppy. I hadn't even thought about what I'd get her to do when she *was* hypnotised, to be honest. So I told her that she was late for school – it was well past eight in the evening –

and suddenly she flew into a panic, running around, throwing stuff into her school bag and complaining about the alarm clock not waking her up.'

He shook his head.

'It was priceless,' he said.

He waited for one of us to say something.

And waited.

There was me, Simon McCormack, Lilly Dartington and Danny. We all lived down the same road in the small village of Millgrove, and we're all roughly the same age, so we tend to hang out together.

We were in 'the shed', the bus-shelter that squats by the side of the village green, and it was one of those long, hazy summer days that seem to stretch out into something closer to a week. To local kids the shed was a place to meet up, hang out, practise some inept graffiti, and generally waste some time.

Across the green from the shed is the Methodist church, and next to that the combined infants and junior school that we all went to before moving to secondary school in the next village over, Crowley.

There's not a whole lot to do in Millgrove.

We couldn't get high-speed broadband yet and we were in the middle of a mobile-phone dead spot that meant you couldn't get a signal within the village itself. We were one of the last generations in the country that didn't rely on mobile phones, although there were rumours that a new mast was going to help us catch up with the rest of the twenty-first century one day soon.

There's a tiny playing field where the older kids try out smoking and train for future binge drinking, so we tended to avoid that. Then there are the three shops – a Happy Shopper, a family butcher's shop and a newsagent.

**NOTE – 'Happy Shopper'**

**A retail outlet whose name demonstrates the period's love of oxymorons – phrases that contain contradictory terms. Other examples are: 'Civil War', 'Reality TV', 'Constant Change', 'Military Intelligence' and 'Friendly Fire'.**

The shed is pretty much in the centre of the village, near enough to the shops in case we needed supplies,

and it has a roof in case of English summer rain.

Simon and I have been friends for years. In all honesty I can't even remember how our friendship came about. Sure, we have a lot of the same interests and attitudes about things, but all that came later . . . I mean, it was revealed over time, so there must just be some . . . I don't know . . . *instinct* for friendship that's separate, somehow, from all of that.

Without the friendship we'd never have discovered the reason we were friends.

You can drive yourself mad going round in paradoxical circles like that.

Simon and Lilly had been going out with each other for a while now, and seeing as Simon is my best friend I seem to get pulled along with them a lot these days. It's weird getting used to sharing a friend . . . and . . . well, Lilly and I weren't getting on if the truth be told.

Danny lives next door to me and kind of just clings on to my coat-tails. Again, I don't know exactly why. Simon and I make him the butt of a lot of jokes but he just shrugs it all off.

That day we were just trying to fill up the day while using as little energy as we could.

And then, of course, Danny told us that he had hypnotised his sister.

Simon stared at him, with a disbelieving look that summed up how the rest of us felt about Danny's revelation.

'You hypnotised Annette?' he said, and the spare disbelief he hadn't managed to put into his stare was crammed into the scathing way he said those three words. There was even a snort at the end of it.

Danny seemed to miss the incredulity and nodded.

'I've been reading a lot of books on the subject,' Danny said, 'and I've been watching lots of Paul McKenna and Derren Brown on DVD. With the talent show coming up I thought I might ditch the magic act this year and do a bit of stage hypnotism. You know, make people bark like dogs, or eat an onion as if it's an apple.'

Simon groaned.

Of all of the area's customs and traditions, the Millgrove talent show is by far the oddest. Every summer since Queen Victoria was sitting on the British throne – with a two-year gap during the Second World War – the people of Millgrove have gathered on the green to compete in the competition.

Even when local lads were dying in the trenches in the First World War, the tradition continued.

Local folklore says the talent show began because of a dispute between two farmers, who'd fallen out over a woman and needed some way to settle the matter. Rather than firing pistols at each other, they each wrote a song for the girl and performed it on the green in front of the entire village, who were the judges of the competition. The village might have forgotten the men's names, but a version of their way of settling the argument was resurrected over a hundred years ago and still continued.

The talent show.

Weeks, even months in some extreme cases, were spent preparing acts (and I'm using that term loosely, most of them were lame Karaoke offerings to amateur-sounding backing tracks) for the grand prize – a battered old cup and some WHSmith gift tokens. As long as it was a slow news week there was a chance of a feature about the show in the *Cambridge Evening News*, with the winners grinning at the camera, holding their prizes.

Who was it who said something about everyone in the

world having their fifteen minutes of fame?

In Millgrove it was more like fifteen seconds.

To me the talent show has always been a bit of a cringe, really. When I was eight years old my dad told that me that, as I was always cracking jokes and making people laugh, I should have a go at being a stand-up comedian at the show.

**NOTE – ‘cracking jokes’**

**Humour was, according to Andrea Quirtell, an important coping mechanism for the horrors of the age. Some people actually counted ‘comedian’ (or ‘joke teller’) as their trade.**

**Quirtell identifies a number of different types of joke. There are: ‘puns’ (which confuse the meanings of words for humorous intent), jokes that work only when written, jokes that appear in the form of a question, jokes that rely on bizarre or ambiguous language.**

**Immanuel Kant believed that people laughed at constructions like these because ‘(L)laughter is an effect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing’. Quirtell disagrees. ‘Laughter is an effect that arises if a race refuses to grow up,’ she writes.**



All in all they were the most embarrassing minutes of my life so far, even beating the moments Mum spent getting out the baby photographs the first time I brought a girlfriend (Katy Wallace, it lasted three weeks) home to meet the folks.

I discovered that there is a huge difference between knowing a few jokes and being a stand-up comic. I don't think I got a single gag right. I fluffed a punch line early on and then made a mistake in the set-up of the next joke that made its punch line irrelevant. Sweating on the makeshift stage, with hundreds of faces staring at me, I dried up and just looked out at them in the grip of a huge panic attack.

I haven't entered the talent show since.

I rarely drag myself along for it, if I'm honest. I always seem to find something else to do. Like pairing socks, or cataloguing my comics.

You know, important stuff.

'You *will* come and watch?' Danny asked, and there was a note of something close to desperation in his voice. 'You will, won't you?'

'Well, I wouldn't miss it for the world,' Lilly said, finally dragging her gaze away from the area of Simon's neck it

had been focused on for most of Danny's 'I'm a hypnotist' revelation.

I nodded.

A part of me even wanted to see Danny do well. To knock 'em dead. Become the talk of the village. Maybe even get his picture in the *Cambridge Evening News*.

But there was another part of me – and I'm not proud of this – that actually wanted to see him fail.

Miserably, horribly and painfully.

It would be like exorcising a ghost.

It would be like therapy.

'Sure,' I said, 'I'll be there.'

Lilly looked at me oddly and a strange expression passed across her face, like a cloud across the sun. I had a sudden sense of discomfort, as if Lilly had seen – or maybe felt – something that I should have seen or felt but didn't.

I raised an eyebrow to query it, but Lilly looked away, leaving me feeling foolish and confused.

Foolish, confused, and *something else*.

A dark sense of foreboding, as if a storm were brewing.

## 02

That night – one of the last nights of my ordinary life – I mentioned Danny’s intentions to my parents over the dinner table.

‘Good on him,’ my dad said around a mouthful of vegetarian stew. ‘We haven’t had a hypnotist before.’

**NOTE – ‘vegetarian stew’**

Apparently ‘vegetarian’ was still a dietary choice in Straker’s day, rather than a social responsibility. See Chadwick’s informative history: *What didn’t they eat? Flesh as food.*

*Of course we hadn’t, I thought. Who, apart from someone as mad as Danny, would suddenly decide they were going to become one?*

‘It should make a nice change,’ he continued, looking at something on his fork with suspicion. A lump of beef-style

Quorn stared back at him. 'It's going to be great this year.'

*Yeah, great*, I thought.

I could already pencil in a few of the high spots.

Mr Bodean and his trombone.

Those creepy Kintner twins and their version of 'Old Shep' that I'm sure was used in Guantanamo Bay to get Al Qaeda terrorists to talk.

Mr Peterson, the village postman, and his annual ventriloquism act with a hideous homemade dummy called Mr Peebles.

A whole bunch of hyperactive kids doing bad impersonations of Britney or Kylie or – *shudder* – Coldplay.

**NOTE – 'Coldplay'**

**O'Brien makes a persuasive case for a 'Coldplay' referring to a kind of dramatic or musical presentation characterised by being utterly bereft of any signs of genuine emotion.**

A recorder recital.

Some truly mind-numbing dance routines.

I shook my head.

*Poor Danny.*

‘Are you going to be doing a turn this year?’ my mum suddenly asked me. She actually wasn’t joking, although it could easily be mistaken for some kind of sick humour.

I felt the usual prickle of shame pass from my stomach, up my spine, and on to my face, where it magically made my cheeks go red.

‘I don’t think so,’ I said quietly, and prodded some semicircles of carrot on to the far side of my plate with my fork.

*Just let it go, I prayed silently, please just let it go.*

No such luck.

‘He’s scared he’ll choke again,’ my idiot little brother Chris said, grinning.

I scowled at him.

‘Christopher Straker!’ Mum said sternly.

With Mum, full name equals big trouble.

Chris’s goofy grin fell from his lips.

‘Well, he did choke,’ he muttered, trying to defend his comment by rephrasing it slightly.

Mum growled.

Dad, it seemed, was utterly oblivious to the exchange and was still thinking about Danny's star turn.

'I've always wondered how stage hypnotists get people to do all those things,' he said. 'I mean, it has to be some kind of trick, hasn't it? The people can't really be hypnotised, can they?'

'I'm sure I don't know,' Mum said. 'Wasn't there a man who was hypnotised and then died and carried on living because no one had given him the command to wake up?'

'That was a film, dear,' Dad said.

'It was a story by Edgar Allan Poe,' I offered.

'I didn't know the Teletubbies *had* first names,' Mum said, and I rolled my eyes at her.

**NOTE – 'Teletubbies'**

Many theories exist about this word, but none are particularly satisfactory. Or, indeed, convincing. Kepple in his essay 'A Pantheon of Teletubbies' seems sure that it is a word of deep religious significance, referring to a collection of gods or goddesses almost exclusively worshipped by children, although his evidence is seen by most scholars as, at best, fanciful.

‘Danny says he hypnotised Annette,’ I said. ‘Made her think she was late for school.’

Mum screwed her face up. ‘That was a bit mean of him,’ she said.

‘Was she late for school?’ my dad asked, missing the point, as usual, by about twenty-five metres.

Chris pulled a face at me, but I turned the other cheek and ignored him.

‘The point is that she *must* have been hypnotised,’ I said.

Blank looks from Mum and Dad said I needed to explain a little further.

‘It’s the *summer holidays*,’ I said. ‘You don’t get ready for school when there’s no school to go to.’

‘Oh yeah,’ Dad said.

‘And it was night time,’ I finished.

Mum was looking over at Dad with one of the strange expressions that had become all too frequent in our house.

Even the simplest, most innocent statements could be met with tension, with Mum and Dad always on the lookout for traps and pitfalls in everything said within the walls of the house.

Because, I guess, they spent so much of their time setting them for each other.

This is a portrait of the Straker family *before* the talent show.

So, when things get crazy you have a suitable base for comparison.

You see, Mum and Dad were ‘having problems’, and were ‘trying to make a go of things’. Both of those phrases, it turns out, are a sort of grown-up code for ‘their marriage was in trouble’.

My dad had left us almost a year before, and he’d only come back a couple of months ago.

Anyway, to trim a long story not quite so long, Mum couldn’t cope when he was away. And so I stepped in to help her. I became the honorary ‘man’ of the family, with responsibilities that I really didn’t want or need placed upon my shoulders.

I ended up being responsible for Chris an awful lot.

Which meant I ended up telling Chris off an awful lot.

It wasn’t something that sat very easily with me.

It certainly didn’t sit very easily with him.



Mum was too emotionally drained to do battle with Chris, so it fell to me to make sure he did his homework, cleaned up his room, ate everything on his plate.

I became a miniature dictator.

I might have been helping Mum, but I sure as heck wasn't helping myself.

Or Chris, for that matter.

Then Dad came back, begging for forgiveness.

Things had been weird ever since he moved back in.

Every silence, action or look held hidden meanings.

And I suddenly wasn't so important any more. I went back to being a kid again. Any power I had assumed was gone in an instant.

I had been forced into a role that I didn't want, so why should I feel bitter about being squeezed out again?

Powerlessness, I guess.

Chris doesn't let me forget.

He resents any attention our parents offer me, and rejoices in seeing me fail.

Mum and Dad act as if nothing has changed, when even I can see everything has.

That's my family.

Drive you absolutely crazy.

But you miss them when they're no longer here.

When the bad stuff comes – and it always will – you look back on those moments with longing.

The bad stuff was just around the corner.

The talent show changed everything.

Forever.

That's why I like to think about the way things were, however imperfect they seemed at the time.

In extraordinary times, the ordinary takes on a glow and wonder all of its own.