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Richard by Kathryn

The Life of Richard Whiteley

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Extract

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ONE

To begin at the end, Richard died on Sunday, 26 June 2005. He was only 61. The last year of his life had been one of the best. Twelve months previously, almost to the day, a dream of his had been realised: two vowels and a consonant. He was a stout believer in all things British and he revered the Honours system, hoping one day that he might be recognised. The fact that he was recognised nearly everywhere, anyway, without the need for a gong seemed almost to be lost on him.

He had accepted his OBE in advance, of course, by post but he was concerned that the public announcement of it should come as a surprise to me. There is a Palace embargo on the news until Saturday morning so the first to break it tend to be the radio stations at 12.00 midnight on that day. Richard had carefully planned that we would be driving home from the Timeform dinner at York Racecourse and he would casually turn on Radio Five and I would be bowled over by the news, maybe annoyed that he had kept it secret.

At the time I was hosting an afternoon show on Radio York. The Friday before, Richard, a forty-year veteran of

presenting news television, remembered that the Honours Lists went out to the media the day before so they could do their interviews. So he rang the manager at the radio station and asked that on no account should I be allowed to see it.

Unfortunately somebody had earlier come down from the newsroom and casually mentioned to me: 'You'll need a hat, then?'

I didn't follow her.

'You'll need a hat,' she repeated, 'to go to the Palace.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Richard's in the Honours List. He's got an OBE.'

He was at York Races and his mobile phone was off but I called and left a message saying: 'I know – and I intend to buy a very expensive hat.'

An OBE may not seem a big deal to some people – Melvyn Bragg is a lord and lots of actors have been knighted – but to Richard it meant everything. It was a vindication of his career – 'for services to broadcasting'. A broadcaster: that is all he had ever wanted to be since his dad photographed him at the age of eight outside the BBC. In fact he worked for Yorkshire Television – 25 years as the face of Yorkshire on *Calendar*, and 23, slightly overlapping, years on *Countdown*.

He was a broadcaster and whether you're on hospital radio or national TV or international satellite, you still try to communicate as best you can. With Richard, in the past year or two, he had, unwittingly, communicated himself into cult status. The strange way he had entered into so many people's lives was something that nobody fully realised until after his death.

We duly went to dinner at York after the races. On the drive back to our home, in the Dales, he switched to BBC's Radio Five and news of his OBE was among the Honours they chose to report. There were three people in the studio to review the papers and one, presumably brought in for her strong opinions, thought that it was 'absurd to honour people like Richard Whiteley. All he does is sit around in those silly jumpers.' Clearly she had got him confused with Gyles Brandreth. But research was not her strong suit.

You silly bloody woman, I thought, you don't know what he's done. This man, whenever he is asked, will draw the raffle in the tiniest village hall. He has given so much time to people. He was always helpful. The number of people I've met in television who said: 'I wrote to him when I was at school or university and he invited me to come and see YTV (Yorkshire Television).'

Dick (as I usually called him) carefully chose one of the dates when the Queen would be presenting the Honours. I went with his niece Georgie and his son James. When the Queen asked him what sort of broadcasting he did, he dutifully replied 'Daytime. I do a show called *Countdown*.' She gave him a knowing smile. She watched it after Channel 4 racing; he knew because her sister had told him.

Friends from Yorkshire and London joined us for a slap-up lunch at the Ritz afterwards. Carol Vorderman buzzed around excitedly, snapping every moment – something that amused the Barclay twins, owners of the hotel, who were sitting at the next table.

For just one moment I caught a wistful look on Richard's face and asked him what was wrong. Of course, three of the people who had mattered most to him were not with us to celebrate. Seven years previously his sister, Helen, had died of liver cancer. She was 48. That was followed by the death of his mother, Margaret, and then, at the age of only 28, Helen and her husband James's daughter, Alex, died of cystic fibrosis. There seemed to be a tragic curse on Richard's family.

After pudding, when he hoped the distinguished dining room had cleared, Richard had arranged for CJ, a girl who had appeared in one of Gyles Brandreth's shows, to lead us in a sing-song around the Ritz grand piano. It was marvellous. We sang Gershwin and show tunes and Frank Sinatra and Richard's favourites like 'I've Got Rhythm' and '76 Trombones', anything big and rousing. That was the way we tended to end the evening when people came for a meal. Once we went on a friend's yacht and just sang for a week.

It was his favourite thing: to have a bloody good lunch and a big sing-song. He loved 'One for my Baby': 'It's quarter to

three. There's no-one in the place. 'Cept you and me. So set 'em up, Joe.' I think he rather romantically thought that he was sitting in a bar on his own with a drink in his hand. Because he always was the very last to leave, a fact that often used to drive me nuts.

He just couldn't bear to miss anything. Some nights we would be dashing about to three parties. I would suggest that it might be nice if we could go to just one of them. 'But I promised,' he would plead. I think he thought that there might be somebody having a better time than he was.

He did his *Countdowns* during the week and at the weekends we would often go to the races – he had shares in three horses – Al Ava Consonant which was not a huge success, Mare of Wetwang which did win a couple of times, and Twice Nightly which didn't win oncely.

The autumn of 2004 was peaceful, with winter slow to come. We took long walks, which always included a pub, a fire and usually some local friends.

Richard adored the North Riding and even wrote a column about it in *Dales Life* – although this tended to be less about the flora and fauna and more about parking restrictions in Middleham or new one-way systems in Leyburn. He didn't like change.

At Christmas we went, as usual, to Giggleswick School for the carol service. The candlelit chapel and the treble singing 'Once in Royal David's City' sent shivers down the spine. For him it brought back the carefree days of his childhood. More than that, it was very much part of English tradition, something he clung to like a vice.

We spent Christmas Eve of 2004 at The Parsonage. It was a lean gathering, just James, the late Helen's husband, who had become a judge, and his surviving daughter, Georgina – not the huge family gathering of days of yore, but it was surprisingly enjoyable, warm and happy. They stayed the night and the next morning we were like children, thrilled as we unwrapped presents. Dick gave me a huge box. I groaned silently at Georgie, fearing it might be a computer – the last

thing I wanted to do was set up a computer on Christmas Day. But it was a sleek flat-screen television, which I treasured.

We escaped to Birmingham for Christmas Day to stay with Richard's former co-presenter Bob Warman, his wife Di, and their children Guy and Claudia. Bob made the move back from Leeds to the Midlands twenty years ago and has remained the 6.00 p.m. rock of the local news, a famous and trusted face.

He was the only person to call Richard 'Ricco'. They relaxed in each other's company and liked to go on holiday together. After lunch, Bob told the family about their first one which was to Malta in 1979. Richard was well known in Yorkshire through *Calendar* and Bob was doing his first stint presenting *ATV Today* in the Midlands. They decided to go to a restaurant in Sliema which was popular with British tourists. Richard, who loved playing games, suggested to Bob that the first of them to be recognised would be treated to dinner by the other.

Bob agreed. They walked into the restaurant and the Maltese barman immediately said in a thick accent: 'Bob Warman. *ATV Today*.'

Richard was incredulous and not a little miffed that a native of Malta should cause him to lose the bet. He asked the barman how he knew Bob and the chap confessed he had done time in Leicester Jail and the telly was on every night in the recreation room.

'Sorry, Ricco,' said Bob, 'but you're paying.'

'It doesn't count,' Richard replied, turning to the barman. 'You didn't *choose* to watch him.'

The Warman children broke up in laughter.

The days after Boxing Day were always ones that Richard could happily have abolished like Alan Rickman's order to 'Cancel Christmas' in *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves*.

His birthday fell on 28 December and then there was New Year's Eve, grim reminders to him of the passing of time and the inevitability of change. It wasn't that Richard thought he was Peter Pan and didn't want to grow up. It was just that he was 61, retired from Yorkshire Television, and, although he did not want for money, he had few hobbies that would fill

his later years: no fishing or golf or DIY or gardening. He loved the here and now, not just *Countdown* but its spin-offs, meeting new people, doing guest shots, opening things, closing the bar.

James, his 17-year-old son, came up for a couple of days and we went for lunch on Dick's birthday to the Wyvill Arms in Constable Burton. We talked about James's A-levels and he informed his father that it was his intention to take that teenage treat, the 'gap year'.

That evening we sat and watched telly, not saying very much. It was to be the last time that James would see his father at The Parsonage.

In a major New Year's Eve avoidance manoeuvre – it was the only day of the year Dick *didn't* want to go to a party – we took off for Sao Bras in Portugal where he had bought Casa Liliana in the Algarve Hills. Richard had never really intended to buy abroad but he had taken part in the TV programme *A Place in the Sun* where he looked at various places in the Algarve pretending he wanted to.

Subsequently a friend, who was going through a divorce and needed money quickly, offered Richard Liliana. It was an old Portuguese farmhouse with small windows and thick walls which kept out the suffocating summer heat – very different from the whitewashed villas with their picture windows on the coast. But this was much more Richard's style – he preferred chicken and chips at a roadside *taverna* to the upmarket golfers' restaurants. And it would have been a good buy had it not been for the fact that, with the first rain of the season, we discovered it had a roof like a colander: we ran round the house putting down buckets and mopping up. It was like a Laurel and Hardy film and when we took in the absurdity of it we just laughed and laughed at ourselves.

We also inherited Lady Daphne Powell, who looked after the place while we were in England. Since splitting up with her baronet husband, Lady Daphne had run a cattle farm in Zimbabwe, holding out courageously against Mugabe and his thugs until they physically ejected her. No Portuguese plumber could put one over on this formidable woman.

Dick and I went for a Chinese meal that New Year's Eve – a safely non-festive thing to do since the Chinese New Year is some time later – but then we were attracted by a firework display by the sea and couldn't resist the temptation to go and stand on the beach and watch the shooting stars over the Atlantic.

Richard's old friend, Iain Johnstone – a colleague from ITN – came to stay. Richard had been Iain's best man and Iain had been Richard's at his wedding to Candy. Sadly neither marriage had lasted as long as both their TV series – Iain had devised the BBC's *Film '71*.

We went to the open-air market in Almancil where the boys bought 'Lacoste' shirts for four pounds and thick real leather belts with 'Gucci' and 'Fendi' buckles for two.

The evenings drew in early. Richard had worked out a way he could watch maybe three episodes of *Miss Marple* in succession on his new satellite system. Somehow, abroad, the programme held an extra enchantment.

We also watched Richard in a celebrity version of the BBC quiz, *Hard Spell,* which they had called *Star Spell.* He didn't want to go on it – since he made a public living from words he could have made a bit of a fool of himself. The previous year he did a 'celebrity' *Mastermind* and came last, mainly because his chosen subject – 'The BBC from 1950 to 1970' – was ridiculously wide. He had swotted up on the subject from the advent of satellite to the advent of colour but his first question was: 'What animal was Tag in *Rag, Tag and Bobtail*?' It completely flummoxed him and he never recovered. (The answer, future BBC historians may like to know, is 'a mouse'.)

But there was a fundamental decency about Richard and he felt he should find out how it felt to be in the firing line on a quiz show, not least so that he could have greater empathy with his own contestants on *Countdown.*

I knew the result of *Star Spell* but Iain didn't and watched tensely as Dick nearly fell at the first hurdle and was likely to be ejected. Fortunately for him, Richard McCourt got in a muddle and saved his bacon. The show ended with Dick

triumphantly spelling 'cantankerous' and winning the £10,000 prize ahead of Jo Brand, Penny Smith and Jeremy Bowen. He gave the money to the Cystic Fibrosis charity in memory of his niece, Alex.

He was nevertheless relieved to get back to the chair where his spontaneity rather than his knowledge was tested to record another thirty *Countdowns* in Yorkshire.

February is the cruellest month in the Dales: the winds cut into your cheeks like blades and the thick snow often made us housebound. But we were privileged and for the third winter we took off for a break in Cape Town. We rented a friend's place and lived quite simply. We liked to go to Franschhoek (the word means 'French place' since the Huguenots had settled there), where there was a shop that had the most fragrant soaps you have ever smelt. Then cheese soufflés for lunch at La Fromagerie and maybe a little wine tasting at the local vineyards.

We went to the races and also the Test match; England were touring and the 'Barmy Army' caught sight of Richard as he was leaving and broke into a united chorus of 'There's only one Richard Whiteley.' He liked that.

We knew David Gower from a previous visit, so one evening we were lucky enough to meet with him and Athers (Mike Atherton) and (Henry) Blowers in the bar and hear their amusing reminiscences.

But the high point of this holiday was a trip to Delta Camp, Okavango. From your bedroom in the safari camp you can look out over the lagoons and see crocodiles and hippos and more species of birds than I knew existed. Then, by day, you travel the waterways by dug-out canoe and watch the myriad species of antelopes and buffalo and elephants and other big game.

Richard thought that it was paradise. I would love to think that that is where he is now.

Back in Britain there were many more *Countdowns*, a few stand-in radio shows for me – and back in Portugal there was work to be done on the house. We had plans for the

swimming pool which needed to be regrouted. Casa Liliana was on a hill and the garden was multi-levelled and needed much attention. We took down the pomegranate tree to create a better orchard and set in train the building of a lower terrace where we intended to install a little love seat that a friend, Sally, who was leaving for Morocco, gave us. Sadly Dick never saw it.

His 'extra-curricular' work continued apace. Perhaps at too much pace.

After a run of recordings in April, Richard went straight to Northallerton to give a speech to the Ladies Choir and present some prizes. The next day I drove him to the station and he travelled down to London for a Channel 4 lunch. That night he was guest of honour at a Cystic Fibrosis Dinner at the Royal Lancaster Hotel. He spoke, and did the auction and generally glad-handed charitable donors.

The next morning he rang Iain – they had been due to have lunch – but he said he felt so unwell that he couldn't even finish the phone call. When I spoke to him he said that maybe the fact he couldn't open the windows in the hotel had made him so hot and fluey. He was going to his regular London base, the Sloane Club, to sleep.

I suggested he come home but he had to host the Old Giggleswickian Dinner that he had organised at the House of Commons.

He managed to get through that but instead of staying for a drink with the headmaster, he took off for bed. The next morning I met him at York station. He was sweating quite a lot. We got home and he spent the rest of the day watching TV.

The following day he felt a bit better and we both did a cooking show with a chef at the Leyburn Food and Drink Festival. But, strangely for him, he cried off a friend's barbecue that night and so we just went home. I made him chilli con carne, his favourite, but he didn't want to eat. It was summer but he shivered by the fire.

The following day Dick insisted in going down to Ilkley for his brother-in-law Judge James's birthday. The house was full

of old friends of his and Helen's. He had a good sense of humour and he enjoyed Maggie Marshall and the girls teasing him. 'You men can't just have a cold, you have to have flu.'

But the next day his behaviour became a little erratic. First he couldn't work out how to use his mobile phone, which he was never without. Then he couldn't operate the remote control for the TV. And then we talked about the next day's General Election and he said: 'What General Election?' This from a man who had covered them since 1966 and lived and breathed politics, and I can remember saying to him: 'Are you having a senior moment?'

I then realised it was time to stop messing about and to put Dick in the car to take him to the doctor.

He diagnosed a chest infection and because of his high temperature – which had been making him less than *compos mentis* – put him on a very strong dose of antibiotics.

Richard insisted on getting up the next day to watch the Election news on television. But he didn't get dressed and stayed in his dressing gown, which was unusual for him. He demanded his polling card because he wanted to vote. He turned to me and said, 'I need to go and vote.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' I replied, 'you can't go and vote in your dressing gown and slippers.' He didn't have the will or the energy to get changed.

That night his illness became much worse. He got out of bed to go to the bathroom but he could hardly stand. I went in to help him. I put him in the bath and washed him like a child.

I was getting more and more anxious. I telephoned the doctor who said he would call an ambulance. It seemed to take an age to come. We finally reached the Yorkshire Clinic – with me following in the car. What I didn't know was that Richard's blood pressure was dangerously low by that point and he had lost consciousness. He was given four pints of blood and he came round. I was told, much later, that Richard had had a close-run race with death on that journey.

'Don't worry,' I was assured, 'he's got pneumonia but we can sort him out.'

Paul Silverton, a cardiologist whom Richard knew, was with him and so was Richard Davison, a specialist known as an intensivist. They suggested I go home.

They rang me at three o'clock in the morning to say Richard had been taken into intensive care at the Bradford Royal Infirmary.

At 6 a.m. that morning, I went in to see Richard. He was on a ventilator with various drips going into him.

The doctor took me into a smaller room and told me the details of his illness but I could barely take them in. The trauma of having pneumonia, possibly set off by flu or maybe just a weakened defence system, had caused ulcers that had bled profusely.

I spent every subsequent day with Richard in intensive care. Judge James came to visit and Christine Stewart, who had looked after both Helen and Alex at the end of their lives, was there much of the time. Her knowledge, as a former nurse and through having a consultant as a husband, helped me understand what was happening. And her friendship quite simply kept me going.

To say the very least, Richard had bad luck. He got an infection – not MSRA – but his whole body had turned septic – most dangerously his heart. We never found out what had caused the infection.

He was sedated for the first ten days. I learnt from the consultant that for every day spent in intensive care, it took at least a week to recover. So I cancelled everything in his diary.

The infection had travelled to part of Richard's brain, a condition known as meningococcal meningitis, but thankfully it was not so severe as to cause a stroke. He was put on the highest grade of care, which meant a nurse sat at the end of his bed all the time – even when she went to the loo another nurse had to take her place.

I sat there, too, during the day, putting on a determinedly brave and cheerful face. At one time he had eight lines going into him. When he was sedated I became fixated for hours with the machines that communicated what was happening inside him, watching his blood pressure fluctuating, or

monitoring his oxygen intake or heart rate. At first I would jump up when one of them went 'ping' or a connected alarm went off. Soon I learnt that this was usually the signal to change one of the drips or some other process.

The medical staff started asking me for details of Richard's relatives. When Georgina, Judge James's daughter, arrived with her fiancé Tim, they were all there. Young James, his son, was taking his A-levels in London but paid Richard a visit on Father's Day.

The hospital gave me little jobs to do like massaging his feet, swollen with the infection, to improve his circulation.

Intensive care consisted of beds arranged in the traditional Nightingale pattern. Sometimes curtains were rapidly closed round them. I had been at school at St Joseph's College in Bradford which was quite near the hospital and knew several of the girls from there who had become nurses. A greater coincidence was that the senior nursing sister in intensive care was a woman called Felicity, who had been at kindergarten with Richard where he had pinched her dolly and stuck it down the lavatory. She hadn't forgotten and teased him every day that she was going to get her own back.

'You wait till it's time for me to give you a bed bath,' she said.

Of course it was all said in good fun and it made him laugh.

After about two weeks he was moved out of intensive care and into a ward. The sedation was reduced and he was able to talk to some visitors. God knows where his mind had been during that turbulent period but one of his greatest fears was that he would lose his job as chairman of *Countdown*. I asked the executive producer, Claire Pizey, to come and see him and she reassured him that his job was safe.

Richard made a sufficient recovery to ease himself out of bed and into a chair. I read the papers to him and he listened to the radio. Things seemed slowly to be getting back to normal.

The hospital had discouraged visitors; indeed Richard was there under an assumed name – John Lee – to protect his privacy. But one day, when he had been communicating more

lucidly, I called Frank and Maggie Marshall, two of his oldest friends, and suggested now might be the time to visit him.

Maggie, his late sister's best friend, did most of the talking, telling him all the latest gossip.

Richard appeared to take it in but when they left that evening he said to me, 'Have your friends gone?'

'That was Maggie and Frank,' I said. 'You know them.'

'Are they dead, too?' he asked.

I looked at him. 'Do you think you've died?'

'Oh, yeah,' he replied, almost casually.

'Well, you haven't,' I told him. 'You're very much alive.'

But it didn't sink in. 'Are you happy with what I've left you?' he went on.

'I'm happy, Richard,' I said, turning my head away so that he wouldn't see the tears.