Speak for England

James Hawes

I

SURVIVED BY A SON

Papua New Guinea, Boxing Day

—Keep the line straight, Marley, said the battle-hardened officer, warmly but firmly. Brian Marley stopped blubbering, helplessly obedient even now. He blinked hard several times, shivered convulsively throughout his soaked and emaciated body, then wiped a forearm and backhand over his face, smearing a mixture of blood, sweat, tears, snot, leeches, mosquitoes and various other small, repulsive, salt-licking, blood-sucking, flesh-eating arthropods (many of them uncatalogued and endangered) a little more thinly across his nose and mouth. —That's more like it. Right then. Trousers up and let's show the buggers how an Englishman dies.

There were in fact no Englishmen apart from himself, present or correct, no officer in command of anything and no one to show. Marley was alone in the hellish forest, talking to himself, slumped in a sagging heap, trousers round his knees, forty-three and about to die.

—Can't, he gasped.

—Now see here, laddie, you still tried to get your trousers down and if a man can still be bothered trying to get his trousers down, even if he doesn't quite make it in time, then there's still some fight left in him. So no excuses.

—But I won, I won the show, I've got two million pounds waiting in England, this is all so . . . bloody unfair, he whimpered again, as if he might yet appeal to something other than the uncaring jungle. The sheer injustice of it all made the helpless tears start again in his eyes.

—Unfair, man? Who ever said it was fair? We're here because we're here. Does it mention fair in the Good Book or the King's Regulations? Does it buggery. Come on now, Marley, trousers back on, pick up that damn camera and we'll say no more about it.

Marley pawed feebly at his trousers and looked blearily around to locate the bright yellow, waterproofed, shockresistant, digital satellite camera which had been his constant companion for the past six weeks and which now lay pathetically in the stinking undergrowth. A yard away. Too far to reach. Even if he could hold it steady. Too late for that now.

He groaned softly and heard the dead, echoless sound of his own lonely voice, damped by the soggy, rampant greenery as effectively as if he were sitting in a

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soundproofed studio. His head rolled backwards of its own accord, smacking itself hard against the rock wall. He hardly noticed the blow. Yet another nameless insectoid horror, far too big and with far too many legs, wandered across his face, but he only even bothered to brush it idly away when one of its feelers actually began to probe his nostril. He scarcely cared. Death seemed a welcome friend, a mere cessation of horror, a quiet slide into a warm, dark river . . .

—So you're going to die? What do you want, man, the ruddy VC? Every mincing little pox doctor's clerk and every arse-licking shopwalker is going to die. You're one of the lucky ones, for God's sake. How many of the poor sods on Hood got the chance to know they were sorting things out for their son and heir? And to leave him a message? Eh?

—Yes, yes, yes, OK, mumbled Marley to his invincible other self. Anything to shut the mad bastard up.

He waited for the next shivering lurch in his body and, when it came, allowed himself to slump sideways, using the small momentum he thus gained to fling out his right arm, so that he could hook two fingers into the grab handle of the camera. He caught hold, dragged it in and cradled it to his panting chest. Then he began the long, seemingly impossible process of hauling himself up on to his feet.

—That's the stuff, Marley!

Marley did not know why he had started talking like this to himself, since he had never been anywhere near the Army. But he remembered when the voice had begun. It had suddenly come to him, out of nowhere, at the end of the first week, after his seventh unbearable, sleepless vigil in the forest (the days were horrendous, but the nights beggared belief), when he had been on the verge of quickly giving up on the chance of winning Brit Pluck, Green Hell, Two Million. That morning, the helicopters had come down to offer the six contestants for the first time the (of course) dramatically televised and (naturally) well-strung-out choice: were they really going to stay for another week in the soaking, sauna-hot, pitch-black forest, amid the unbelievable racket of a trillion oversized insects flying, hunting, mating, killing and eating each other (many of them evidently also partial to large, hairless mammals)? Or would they choose instead to fly straight off home, to warmth, sanity, medical care and the consolation of many tabloid interviews? Marley had hesitated, pen in sweating hand, as he looked at the legal waiver which they all had to re-sign each week, before the helicopters left them here again. Live in front of the cameras, he had almost cracked. What chance did he have of winning? Why not give up now, before too much vileness had been endured for nothing? Why pile new, public shame and failure on to the old, private mess of his life?

—Well? Watcha say, Bri'? You comin' home? Fancy a nice warm bath and a nice cold beer wiv me an' the girls, do ya? Decision time, Bri' . . . Home for Christmas or Hell in the jungle?

Marley remembered the impossibly flawless white teeth in the wide-screen smile of the inane presenter as she had posed the question. He remembered her breasts

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shoving out against her ludicrous pink T-shirt (NFR it had said, in spangly letters distorted by the uplifted, surgically enhanced flesh beneath; he had wondered what the hell that meant). He had almost given in. But at that moment of decision, the insane, military voice had come into his head.

—She's not so dumb, Marley. Trying to make you crack. Get those eyes off her tits. Think of your boy, man. What's another week?

Before Marley had been able to decide, the choice had been made for him. One of the other competitors, a sporty little hairdresser from Edinburgh, had run out from the undergrowth towards the helicopters, screaming and weeping, almost beheading herself with the still-spinning rotor blades as she flung herself into the arms of the smiling TV presenters, still gagging convulsively and unstoppably from having awoken to find a cockroach the size of a mouse clambering about inside her mouth. Talk about a fab start to the series! And so, since only one of the six competitors could leave on each flight, the first to fight his or her way on board being given the place, Marley had been forced to stay on anyway.

From that evening onwards, he had instinctively allowed this bizarre voice inside his head free rein. At first, he had merely used it when talking to himself, but soon he had found himself using it when speaking to the camera which was continually transmitting the horrors of his daily life here back to the 24/7 viewers of Brit Pluck, Green Hell, Two Million. He knew that he was clinically mad, talking to himself like this. He was perfectly well aware that it was nuts. But the Voice had kept him going that night, when he had almost wept for home, and it had continued to do so while all around him were gradually but utterly losing their minds and the contents of their bowels. By the time of the second chance to leave, a week later, he had fallen utterly under its spell.

One by one, his rivals had given up, their greed for money and their lust for that modern sainthood, media fame, finally giving way under the unspeakable, crawling, winged nightmare of the rainforest. Each had at last taken the helicopter out in a state of total mental and physical collapse (great telly!). Brian Marley, however, obeying this ruthless yet avuncular parade-ground voice, had even kept up his shaving. It seemed that in pre-emptively embracing lunacy rather than trying to stay sane in a place utterly hostile to human life, let alone civilisation, he had adopted the right tactics.

A fortnight in, failed contestant number two, a handsome young accountant from Bromley whose hobby was skydiving and who had appeared to lack any emotional existence whatever, was forcibly airlifted out because he had become so preoccupied with attempting to dig out with his fingernails the subcutaneous worms infesting his legs that he could not even remember his own name for the cameras, let alone re-sign the legal waiver. That had made good viewing, as had the psychic trauma displayed the following week, when the third would-be double millionaire, a big-boned Lexus saleswoman from Belfast who had been brought up in tinker caravans and had seemed unbreakable, was found eventually, by tracing her radio-location beacon, sitting up a tree doing a very convincing imitation of a bottle-blonde orang-utan. Only his radio-location beacon had saved the fourth member as well: a chatty DIY

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expert from Yorkshire, he was found almost lifeless in a swamp, one arm lost to crocodiles and incurably insane.

The Great British Public was finding this theatre of dissolution and collapse as irresistible as Victorian clerks had found tales of Empire: Channel Seven's viewing figures were breaking records which had stood since the days when people had only had two stations to choose from.

After five endless weeks on nothing but salt, bread, water and vitamin C tablets, Marley's body weight had come down to approximately eight stone and the fight for the two million pounds had come down to precisely himself and a bald, divorced, middle-aged schoolteacher from Swansea whom Marley had long realised was his chief danger because what on earth did a bald, divorced, middle-aged schoolteacher from Swansea have to lose? Any sane defence department would recruit entire battalions of bald, divorced, middle-aged schoolteachers as semi-suicidal shock-troops. Throughout the sixth week, Marley and this Welsh schoolteacher had sat or staggered about in the jungle, observing each other's decay warily from as far away as possible, each carrying out in private his by now almost hallucinatory chats with the spellbound audience back home. The stern Voice had kept on giving its military orders and at last, at last, it was the schoolteacher who had cracked.

How clearly Marley could remember the moment, the glorious moment, when the choppers had come down once again and the schoolteacher had crawled towards the landing place, blubbering gratefully, already clearly doomed to lose his left leg to gangrene. Marley had stood and watched quite happily, assuming an At Ease position, saluting the two helicopters in a nonchalant manner. He knew the rules. He was now the sole remaining competitor, he would sign a final legal waiver, they would cart off the destroyed schoolteacher from Swansea and leave him, Brian Marley, there for one further week, a whole week utterly alone, just himself, his mad instructions to himself, the forest, his camera, water (no bread or vitamins for this last week) and many spare batteries. And the two million pounds to hold out for. They would also leave him an emergency beacon with which he could summon them at any time, a permanent temptation to forfeit the prize money. But Marley had known he would not use it. He had watched the helicopters hover slowly down towards him. He had shaken his head amusedly at the frantic waving of the teacher from Swansea, who, having yielded at last to pain and despair, now seemed possessed by the terrifying idea that his rescuers might now turn mockingly around, fly off and leave him here to die after all.

—I want my pension, see, Marley, my pension, I've paid into it for so long, so bloody long, all those years with all those little bastards, oh yes, it's a very, very good scheme really, nothing in the private sector can compare, I'll even be able to eat out once a week or so, you know, so long as I keep saving the newspaper tokens. You go ahead and die here if you want, Marley, I'm getting that bloody pension, I am, and I'm going home for Christmas!

—Absolutely, Marley had nodded, smartly. He was invulnerable, for he had no pension at all back in England, and if he did not win here, Christmas would be merely a long haul of duty and guilt. Free of hope, he had known no doubts. One

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more week of mere physical torment in this place was nothing, nothing at all, compared to the vast lifetime of shame and regret that surely awaited him back in his so-called home . . .

. . . the thudding wind from the rotors was cool and steady, he could see them coming down, as clearly as if it was next week already, here they came to waft him back in triumph, alive, clean, rich, sending him to embrace his mother and little son in time for a real Christmas after all, and then to take Consuela Martinez in his arms, in an England where at last he could be truly at home . . .

—Put a sock in it, Marley.

—Eh? What? Marley opened his eyes and found to his wailing dismay that he was still alive, still alone and still dying.

—No good to anyone, remembering that sort of stuff. All gone now.

—No, croaked Marley. —No good to anyone now. All gone. Not going home.

All gone, yes. Several perma-grinning young presenters and two entire TV crews had perished, along with all the water, vitamins and replacement battery packs, as well as the emergency GSM beacon, when the two Channel Seven helicopters, vying for the best shots of this climactic point, had managed to collide some fifty feet above Marley and the blubbering Welshman as they came down to land. Marley had watched in disbelief, and at first in something like rage, as the double wreckage had hung impossibly, for whole seconds, like two vast iron dragonflies frantically mating, then plunged towards him, landing plumb on top of the landing site's radiolocation device and the wretched schoolteacher.

Marley had not had time to dive for cover. He had been flung back by the blast and half baked by the sudden bloom of appalling heat that followed in its wake. He had fled wildly, trailing smoke from his smouldering clothes, along with every sentient creature for miles around. When he had dared to return, he had found that no one and nothing had survived. It was at this point that he realised his own radio-location beacon was no longer on his wrist. After twenty frantic minutes he had found it where he had fallen when hit by the explosion: melted, deformed, destroyed. He had calmly sent a long clip of footage out on his digital camera and had then stood there amid the smouldering wreckage and the mummified, twisted bodies for several hours, more in numb disbelief than anything else, expecting every moment to see rescue helicopters approaching. But none came. His camera could only transmit, not receive; he had no way of knowing who, if anyone, was getting his film. Again and again he had sent forth pictures and sounds into the empty, pitiless skies above the small clearing (Where are you? Surely you can see the smoke?) until the horrid forest night had fallen with its usual awful, equatorial speed. As the last light faded, Marley, frantically scanning the fast-darkening patch of sky above his head for any sign of approaching aircraft (Hello? Look, I think you should hurry up), had finally been driven from the crash site by nightmarish hordes of enormous, slavering crocodiles, drawn out of their depthless, Jurassic swamps by the scent of flame-grilled Western flesh. Trying to send yet another camera message (Gentlemen, I

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suggest you beam me aboard), he had almost waited too long: in the end, he had escaped those lunging, prehistoric jaws only by a despairing scramble up into trees filled with horrific, thigh-wide snakes, unbearable clouds of mosquitoes, hordes of ticks, armies of leeches, vast, clattering moths, small but inconceivably deadly frogs and spiders the size of dinner plates. In the hideous blackout of the night, he had clambered, yelping with pre-human terror, from branch to branch by handhold alone, sometimes brachiating helplessly and unintentionally through the yawning darkness. Then he had fallen at last, expecting death, but had slid instead God knew how far down a muddy ravine, climbed blindly, staggered, blundered crazily again through the forest, and had finally collapsed into a shivering half-sleep, wedged high in the crook of a large, slimy tree.

For three days, entirely without food and with only filthy swamp water to drink, he had tried to find the wreckage again, knowing that some rescue mission would be mounted eventually, but it had been no good: he had somehow become trapped in a steep-sided gorge where his camera could find no signal. And he simply had no idea which way to go: the forest was so impossibly dense that even the mile-high pyre created by the destruction of two well-fuelled choppers was completely invisible a mere hundred yards off. Twice he had thought he heard more helicopters, high up above the sightless canopy of leaves, but he had not been sure, amid the hideous, incessant whirring of insect life, if they had been real or not. He had no way to attract them in any case. A dozen times he had tried to climb the enormous trees and reach the light, but without claws and a prehensile tail it had been a physical impossibility. Each time he had fallen or slid trembling down again, quite sure that only certain death lay that way.

Yesterday, it had got worse. Yesterday the rains had come.

Earth-shaking thunder in the inhuman, unseen heavens above, the insane battering of the downfall on to the forest canopy a hundred feet over his head as endless lightning flashed beyond the dark roof of leaves; waterfalls cascading down between the trees. At first he had rejoiced at being able to drink again. But then he had noticed the swamps rising all around him with impossible speed. He had bludgeoned his way madly through the forest, deafened and blinded by the deluge, raging with fever and terror, wild with hunger and despair. By the time the downpour stopped, he had found himself trapped between a swiftly rising, crocodile-infested morass and a colossal, near-vertical wall of rock.

And so now, today, here he was, standing at the foot of an awe-inspiring cliff that blocked off the world and the sky, lost, alone and dying. It was, strangely, the being alone that seemed most impossible to bear. If there had been a hand, any hand really, to stroke his hair while he died, he would have died gladly and on the spot. Well: we are all surely born to die, the wretched and the great, but perhaps none of us is equipped to last for long alone. So at least thought Brian Marley, with wild deathbed clarity. As he stood and tried not to sway in front of the camera, he was now assaulted by visions not of escape, but merely of a happy death, images pornographic in their luscious, gold-lit, yearning intensity: a man in a four-poster bed, candlelit, surrounded by his children and grandchildren; a man in a mountain tent of animal skins, attended by shamans and weeping relatives; a man in a water-

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filled shell-hole being given a last cigarette by his comrades. Most bizarre of all: a man in a hospital bed, holding newborn baby twins, with his five-year-old son and young wife beside him, attended by a competent young doctor preparing a big syringe of some gold-tinted, gleaming opiate, a respectful accountant standing by with reassuringly thick wads of insurance documentation, and a priest of some nondescript but mighty denomination, murmuring into Brian Marley's ear, on his warm deathbed, last rites which no priest has ever said but all, perhaps, have really meant. Simple, gentle words which seemed to consist largely of the repeated phrase:

—Well done, Brian Marley, well done . . .

Marley came to and found himself awake, unsaved, alone. He also found that he had automatically begun to lie down in the sodden filth.

—Not yet, Tommy, not yet, he barked to himself through creaking vocal cords.

His mission was clear and simple: to record his last message, and then to climb. Just to climb, until he found a signal or fell and died first. Perhaps he would find a ledge to die on, up there, somewhere beyond those hated, sun-killing treetops. If he could, he would cram himself into the rocks, tie himself to branches with his belt, send off his message and die. The birds would get him, of course, but at least, that way, they would eventually find something of him. He recoiled in illogical horror at the thought of lying down in the stinking filth and simply returning to that liquid, primeval matter as rotting meat for crocs and leeches. Better a sky burial. His last act would be to defy the forest which had killed him. To reach at least the light.

—That'll show the buggers, eh, chaps? So let's get on with it.

—Get on with what?

—Dying, Marley, dying. It's what we're here for, old man.

—Yes, of course.

All his agony and terror was now replaced by a simple wave of animal exhaustion. The logic was inescapable. He was mere hours from death at most. There was, therefore, no hope. Which, in a strange way, was better.

—Come on, come on, chest out, belly in and all that rot.

Marley tried to stand up straight, unsupported by the rock, but his arms and legs felt as though they were composed of wet, cold spaghetti; his guts seemed to be a mass of sodden old tennis netting that might at any time simply drop rotting through his loosened pelvis; his head was a monstrous, liquid-filled, lolling weight upon a ludicrously skinny pole. His eyes were more and more determined to roll backwards into his skull. Even the fetid tendrils of the forest seemed an inviting bed. He began to drift away from the rock wall and to sway back downwards again towards the warm, green filth . . .

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—No you don't, Marley.

—What? What?

—You forgetting something again? For God's sake, Marley, what do you call that damn thing in your hand?

Marley looked down at his right hand.

—Oh yes, camera, he croaked.

—Exactly. You've still got your boy to think about. Biggest privilege a man can have. Chance to show him what you were made of, show him how you took it. Leave him something to be proud of. Last letter home. And don't give me any of that telling-the-truth bollocks. Only spotty little teenagers and German bloody philosophers are interested in the truth. The truth is for the Lord God Almighty to know and for you and me to shut up about. Give the poor little sod something good to remember his daddy by, that's what we want, isn't it? So pull yourself together, man. Just this one little job to do, then I'll let you sleep till the Archangel Gabriel blows his ruddy trumpet.

Marley blinked. Yes. A message to his son. A chance to make a last impression on the world, to leave some mark of himself behind. He would be more than scattered bones in mould. A picture in oils, a carving in marble, an enamelled vignette on a gravestone. He would die humanly, with a name and a face, not as an unknown beast.

—That's it, laddie, get set.

Marley had one little son, Tommy, to show for all his forty-three years on earth, for some twenty-four years' regular enough sexual activity with various women. Not a great hit rate, perhaps. Not much, compared to an Orthodox Jew in New York, a reasonably successful Kalahari bushman or a proud, penniless farmer in the mountains of Afghanistan, maybe. Not exactly the stuff of which empires are won, built up and peopled, true. And yet there was, or at least so it seemed to Brian Marley as he prepared unexpectedly to die, every difference in this world and the next between an obituary that finishes with he leaves no children and one that concludes he is survived by a son.

—Good man, Marley, that's the spirit.

As for Consuela Martinez, what could he say to her? Nothing. He hardly knew her, except as an impossible dream. He had only ever kissed her once; to leave a message for her would be simply laughable. So he would not. He would save the private, impossible dream of her eyes, her hair, her mouth for his last breath, his last thought. He had read somewhere that Hell or Heaven are defined simply by the last image created in your dying mind: if that last vision is bad, if it is fearful, rancid, sour and bitter, then your life has been a logical and inevitable progression to Hell; if it is suffused with light, love and hope, then Heaven is gifted to you automatically.

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Perhaps. At any rate, that was the only hope he had, so that was the way it would be: he would now record his last message to his son, then climb towards the sky until his camera found a signal. He would press SEND and, knowing that his last words were flying off, digitally encoded and thus almost eternal, towards some unseen circling satellite, sure now that his little boy would have something from him, he would hug his dream of Consuela tight, let go, fall and die.

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