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Me

The Authorised Biography

Byron Rogers

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ME

THE AUTHORISED BIOGRAPHY

BY

BYRON ROGERS

Aurum

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A Warning to the Curious

Autobiographies are misleading. They present a life as linear narrative, written with what Henry James called 'the terrible fluidity of self-revelation'. Only a life isn't like this. When a man looks back what he remembers are moments, people, incidents; these bob to the surface like the floating debris watched by Jack Hawkins and John Gregson in 1950s British war films after yet another successful depth charging of a German U-boat. Such things are jagged, vivid, most of them having no connection with each other; but through them, with no order imposed, you get a sense of who, or what, once gave them meaning.

What follows is an attempt to write an autobiography in these terms. I was startled into writing it because of something which had the effect of a depth charge.

Ego autem coacervavi omne quod inveni.
(I have now made a heap of all I have found.)

Nennius, ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*

For reasons of self-preservation, certain names in the heap have been altered.

1

Walking Away

THE LETTER CAME at just after eleven o'clock in the morning, which was the time the mail came round in the offices of the *Daily Telegraph* Magazine, then just off Fleet Street. When you write for a newspaper or a magazine letters come in various categories: crowing letters ('The capital city of the Treens was Mekonta, I am surprised you didn't know that'), pained letters ('I could see you were scribbling in a notebook, but I did not expect to find myself quoted in a national newspaper'), cross letters ('I take great exception to your references to Carmarthenshire County Council. I assume that at some time you failed to achieve employment by that body'), even the odd fan letter. The last I tended to keep, though in time I usually lost them. But one letter I have not lost.

Immaculately typed on four sheets of A4 paper, and addressed to me at the Magazine, it has, however, no home address, just a date: 3 May 1981.

> Sorry about the lack of tears. I do regret their absence as much as the lack of some emotions which may make me less of a woman. However, I had just undergone the most profoundly moving experience in my recollection. I had been looking forward to twelve hours (was it?) of you, and was utterly relaxed into the safety of this eternity of bliss. You are so thoroughly addictive, and you and your hands and your eyes and your mouth and your

> tongue and your body had transported me to such realms of ecstasy that I had hitherto neither known nor even believed possible …

What?

Until then it had been just another office morning. That is to say, at my desk I had been smoking my pipe, reading with some enjoyment the profile of a Welsh tramp I had spent six weeks writing for the Magazine (and hoped to spin out for another two), and, with even more enjoyment, watching the strong bare legs of the secretaries as they swore in their precise English upper middle-class voices, chewed their long hair, and lied to their boyfriends on the telephone ('What a bore, I can't make tonight, I have to go for drinks at my godmother's'). As far as I was concerned I hoped things might go on like this forever.

My years on a provincial paper and on *The Times* were over, and as the one staff writer on the Magazine I had found myself among more beautiful young women than I had ever known existed, let alone seen in one place. The office I was in was next door to the fashion department, into which, breezing one day for a light, I came on a model standing very naked and very lovely, trying on a new range of swimwear. She grinned, then laughed out loud as I bolted.

Here the scruffy young photographers came and were dispatched, once to Outer Mongolia, where, watched by blank-faced herdsmen, they photographed their even more blank-faced models against a vast sky. And then photographers and women were gone, to rainforests, mountains, polar landscapes, and, had this been possible, to the moon.

For this was a colour magazine in the time of its last hurrah, spendthrift, mad and confident, before the advertising revenues

faltered, and the accountants came like the barbarians. It was a time of fantasy. And then at eleven o'clock on a May morning the letter came. I read on, as I am reading it now. The letter is yellowing and creased, but then I have been reading it over and over for twenty-eight years.

> On Thursday came the pain, and no hangover to cover it with. I got up and dressed and people came to sit with me like you give your company to the bereaved to alleviate their grief or perhaps to hear something awful that may brighten by comparison your own life. I don't know because I could not talk and I could not cry, and I was left locked in my own personal Hell.
>
> When I found myself alone I climbed the stairs to our bed. I had not washed and I would not change the sheets I had lain on with you. Besides, rising at all had taken all the resolve of which I was capable. I sank onto the bed, taking care to land where your body had been, and froze into a paralysed state, lamely thinking, if this is death, what has broken since it could not have been my heart?
>
> I was so cold and could not move to switch on the electric blanket. Then I was suddenly hot as in a fever, and the centre of my body ached as if the emptiness were growing to fill me to the outer limits of my skin, and, ever growing, was about to tear me apart. Every muscle ached for you, and all of me was burning for your touch. Then those rich juices of love that were longing to mingle with yours came pouring out of my cunt.

At that I held the letter up to the window, but no, I hadn't made a mistake. Bloody hell.

> I wasn't dreaming and only too aware of your absence, but those little muscles that you love so much when they are masturbating

> and sucking your cock inside me started to move, yearning to feel you but feeling only a closing and opening on themselves and a seemingly endless flood of love-juice which soaked the bed and drained me so that I wondered if maybe it was blood. This went on for a long time and the realisation that without you there is no orgasm, no relief, and no end to the agony, became too painful to bear. At last I turned and twisted and found myself breathing into the pillow that still held a faint scent of you …

At that point I put it down, for despite its wordiness the prose had an intensity you tended not to get on colour magazines. Was the writer a lunatic? After ten years on the *Telegraph* I thought I knew all that was to be known about lunatics.

The Magazine appeared inside the main paper, but was in, not of, it, rather like Montenegro, the independent little mountain kingdom that somehow survived inside the ramshackle Ottoman Empire, a place where the central authorities never came. It, the Magazine that is, had its own offices away from the main building, rooms here and there, the centre of its power seven floors up from the department where I lurked.

There, in a brown felt-lined room, dark even at midday, a thin ray of intense light illuminating a few inches of his desk, the editor John Anstey ruled absolute and withdrawn, a Grand Turk among the women. The editor of the main paper, which appeared six days of the week, had one secretary. Anstey, who edited a give-away weekly magazine, had four.

But then he needed them, for he communicated only by letter, even with his own staff, and then usually to sack them, in particular the few men he employed as feature writers and office managers. Men were a threatened species on the Magazine, and

had Anstey been able to recruit eunuchs he would have done so. As it was, men appeared and abruptly disappeared, some into other trades, one to become a carpenter, another to open his own restaurant, men who had spent their lives in journalism but who, as the result of life under Anstey, were prepared to take up any career so long as it had nothing to do with papers or magazines in this world again. Once there was a hiccup, and two features editors found themselves on each side of a desk, at first neither daring to ask the other what he was doing there, or even who he was. A few days later one was gone.

Anstey was a mystery. To meet, this large, impeccably groomed man was charm itself, and there seemed nothing the two of you could not do together. When he interviewed me for the job he talked of his plans to produce the Magazine from the capitals of the world in turn, which later made me think of that other interviewee, in another high place, being shown the cities of the earth.

I did not see Anstey for six months after that. And when I did it was because he had demoted his deputy features editor, an American woman journalist, telling her he was making her an office secretary. That was too much even for his little staff, and we walked out, the dozen of us, and I spent a busy morning phoning *Private Eye*, the Press Association and Reuters.

In the uproar which followed his shadowy bosses intervened, and Anstey was instructed to make peace with his staff, something which involved talking to them. We all crowded into his office and, in the course of an uneasy meeting, I heard him say, 'Byron Rogers has been going round telling everyone that he hasn't seen me for six months, though from what he's been saying about me, I wouldn't have thought he'd want to.' That was the moment I stopped disliking him.



For, like him, I was living out my fantasies. The few people I knew in journalism were rushing about all over the place, reporting on politics, writing leaders, while I was becalmed. What magazine editor today would commission a profile of a tramp, and a Welsh tramp at that? Or one of Jean Straker, the photographer who was then forever in and out of court because of his refusal on ideological grounds to airbrush his nude studies, something that allowed me to write the sentence 'He took a stand on pubic hair like other men took a stand on the Rhine' (though Anstey himself airbrushed this).

I had tea with Straker and one of his models on the lawns of the stately home he had bought when he sold his Soho studio. The

model and Straker were naked, I was in a three-piece suit like a curate who had got in with the wrong set, and it was *Le dejeuner sur l'Herbe,* except that the model, a good-looking woman in her forties, had forgotten to put her teeth in.

On the *Telegraph* Magazine, if you were in favour, you could go anywhere you wanted; in my case Greenland, where a slipstream of farts from dog teams, fed on fish, hung in the thin Arctic air, ten straining rumps pointed at the sleigh. Or like the world's one nudist city, where the dress shops were a scrum of naked women, the bank a queue of creased buttocks waiting to change its Deutschmarks, and from which, emerging into the outside world after three days, I felt my heart pound at the sight of a woman in a dress. Anyone you wanted to meet you could, which for me meant Helen Mirren, a retired hangman and the men who had written the comics and the radio serials of my childhood.

It had its drawbacks, meeting your heroes. I asked the great Charles Chilton, who wrote the 1950s BBC serial *Journey into Space*, why he had made the last Martian a towering armadillo, something that had fascinated me since childhood. Chilton said the only reason he could remember was that he had taken his children to the zoo the week before. It was a time of startling explanations …

By the historian A.L. Rowse, scuttling by to kneel behind me on the floor when I entered his rooms in All Souls. Not turning, he asked, still on his knees, 'You a hetero?' I said I supposed I was, but that I had never really thought about it. 'Knew it, knew it,' he said triumphantly. 'Knew you were heterosexual as soon as you scuffed my mat, and didn't straighten it.'

By Margaret, Duchess of Argyll, talking about her ten-foot portrait by James Gunn, which, because of its sheer size, had to be exhibited in a public art gallery. 'Not many people get hung in their

lifetime,' said the Duchess, although when she read what I wrote about her she must have wished this might still be possible. Still, she managed to get an injunction on the whole Magazine which would have cost the *Telegraph* hundreds of thousands of pounds, had it not got lifted at the very last minute. Anstey among the lawyers was something I had never seen before: with everything closing in on him, his back to the wall, he was happy as the day was long. And this is how I shall remember him. After ten years on the Magazine I hadn't thought anything could surprise me again.

But by God it did.

Like a tank, the relentless eroticism was trundling on.

> Nothing that I had hitherto decreed I would or wouldn't do was under consideration. I stripped my clothes off, still laying (*sic*) on my belly. When I got to my panties I could nearly hear you and feel your hands that are as soft and gentle as mine. My fingers had to find the hard and throbbing point. The touch that could have been yours released new floods and a torrent of ecstasy and pain. When I turned to lay (*sic*) on my back I was empty and so alone.
>
> I began to hope that everything would go away: the emptiness, the need for you, the longing and the memory. If I were to go crazy, how would any alternative matter? If you had telephoned me then, I would have asked what I could do just to hear the sound of your voice, and I would have done anything.
>
> As you said I would, I MISSED YOU. At that moment my body had nothing to cling to but the memory of you: the electrifying feel of your skin against mine, the ardent desire to touch as much that is you with as much of me as possible to set

all the nerve ends tingling, to hear your voice in my ear, breathing words that no one has ever said to me before, to feel and to smell your hair and your skin and to have the glorious freedom to kiss and to lick every part of you. My breasts remembered your hands and your tongue, and my nipples stood erect and expectant. My legs opened as if they had a will of their own, and my cunt was as ready for fucking as ever. The burning need arose; again and again I fingered my clitoris in the centre of that humid swamp that seemed to lay (*sic*) in the eye of a hurricane. I don't know how many times I came, but in the end there was a kind of peace. I don't know whether I have told you that I sometimes pray, not very often, to ask for something. This seemed to be a suitable occasion. I prayed for my sanity and fell asleep.

As if I hadn't had my share of miracles in the last six weeks, another one occurred on Friday morning. I woke to find myself in a crystal-clear new landscape. Easter after Lent, or the newly-washed face of nature after a storm that has broken dams, washed away broken trees or dreams and the rubble of ignorance?

A new life has started. You cannot help being part of it because I owe it to you. You can partake of it on any scale because I am yours even if I never see you again. I know you to be like no-one else and regret the mistake of trying to make you fit one of the patterns I recognise. You are so many things. I admire most of them and now understand those that put you in another dimension and frightened me so much before.

I always knew that accepted standards never fitted me, but I did so long to conform and to be safe. Just now I remembered something else you said. You do have that effect on people. My anxieties seem to have shrunk away as to be barely visible. I have

> grown and from you or God or somewhere I have got the strength to handle an entirely new order of priorities. Also I love you.

It was signed 'Gina'. At first I thought it a hoax, but it was too elaborate for that. Hoaxes, like ransom notes, are to the point.

So whoever Gina was, some experience had hurt her into stately wordiness. Reading it again now, I wonder if English may not have been her first language, for there was the odd spelling mistake and the confusion over 'lay' and 'lie'. Someone had clearly rung all the bells for a very intense woman, religious, lonely, not too cursed with humour, and probably not young. Only I hadn't rung them.

A fortnight later the second letter came, addressed to 'Byron Rogers, The Daily Telegraph Magazine'. It was clear that the writer, like Gina, had no home address for the recipient, and did not give one for herself. It too was neatly typed, though this time just a note. But in other respects it was very different. No mention of feelings this time, or at least none on the surface: whoever she was, the writer was remembering a romp, with three people involved, also a dog in some obscure supporting role.

> You never told me you wrote for *The Guardian* as well, you cheeky devil …

I had written a short feature the paper had headlined 'Here's to You, Mrs Robinson'. This had been prompted by a court case involving a rather good-looking woman in her thirties, living somewhere in the Home Counties, who for some years had housed French teenage boys on school visits, then seduced them. Most had welcomed the experience (according to one of their teachers the essays they wrote about their holidays were effusive, though vague), but it all ended abruptly when the latest two rejected her advances, running into the

street and bawling in their best English for, of all things, an ambulance. The judge gave her eighteen months. He also called her 'an evil woman', which I thought dreadful, considering that I, possibly he, and just about every other man had spent our teenage years waiting for something like that to happen to us. My feature brought down the wrath of the paper's feminist readers upon me, and I had a whole indignant section of the letters page to myself. But this letter writer hadn't seen it like that. At all.

> You have got a lot of strings to your bow – as we all know! Sandra said the article should have been titled ROGERS ON FUCKS AND HOW TO GET THEM. And what about Helen Mirren last week? I bet you charmed the pants off her too – coming off all bashful and on the edge of your seat.

That had been a feature interview, after which Miss Mirren had seen me off into the night, wobbling on my bicycle, with the remains of a bottle of whisky, most of which I and her then boyfriend Liam Neeson had consumed between us. I fell off the bike in Grosvenor Square and, unhurt, finished off the whisky at the kerbside. There followed two lost hours, during which my girlfriend, later my wife, went to the police, who thought it no end of a joke, and suggested I might have gone to some nightclub with Miss Mirren. Which set her mind at rest no end.

> I'm sorry I have got in touch with you again after 'that night'. I know I promised not to but I just keep thinking about it all the time and deep down Angie feels the same. She hasn't mentioned a thing but I look at her across the pool and she's got a funny smirk on her face. She was very upset about Steve coming back, she promised that he never comes back from the Scottish trips earlier than three days. Honest! Anyway he's such an idle sod he

didn't think there was anything funny about me and her starkers and playing with her daft dog! Not so daft if you ask me. I think he was pissed anyway – Steve, that is. You got back alright I hope, round the back. I know you were upset but we promise it won't happen again, so if you want to see teeny-weeny me and Angie again you'll know where to find us on Thursdays. Please, please . . .

Gilly. X X X.

So a typist this time (Gina had not mentioned jobs, and no locations apart from bed), and a good-time girl who every Thursday went on the town with a married friend from her office. But again she was writing to a sexual athlete who had appeared in her life like Spring-heeled Jack, then disappeared, though, again, Gilly had been told this would happen. Everyone I talked to about it (which was just about everyone I met) thought it hilarious, but I began to get worried. What would Jack do next?

The next thing was a postcard addressed 'To the town's Handsomest, Sexiest, most sought after Lover Boy'. On it this was written in a large, wild hand, 'S.O.B.'s presence is requested at a private dinner to be held at a venue yet to be arranged in aid of the "Misfits of the World". Dress optional. RSVP. E.B.'

So another disappearance, more bells having been rung, which clearly now hung idle. I went to see the police at this stage, who also thought it no end of a joke. 'Try to see our point of view, say we got him, what could we charge him with?' asked a detective sergeant at West End Central. 'I mean, all he's ever done is go to bed with women. And their only regret is that he's stopped doing it. The only complainant is you.'

As I was leaving he said idly, 'Just one question, sir, have you any idea why he should want to pretend he was you?' I said I hadn't,

but as I went through the door I realised I hadn't quite liked the way he had asked that.

Still, his question was partly answered when the first phone call came. It was from a woman who wanted to know why I hadn't turned up at the weekend. She wasn't cross, she said she quite understood if I'd been sent abroad at short notice or something; she just wished I could have let her know.

I explained things to her, and there was this long silence. I asked where she'd met him, and she said at an afternoon dance at the Leicester Square ballroom, when he'd told her he was an international correspondent who was abroad most of the time, living out of a suitcase when he was in this country. She then started to cry, and there was a click as the phone went dead.

So that was it. It was quite smart then to say you worked for a colour magazine, and of course it was the perfect cover, particularly if whoever you told knew little about journalism. And I don't suppose anyone who turned up at an afternoon dance was going to ask too many questions. No address, no phone number, just Captain America coming and going, and out of reach of these vulnerable women, as I had now come to assume they were. Suddenly it had become sad.

There were other phone calls which I managed to avoid ('It's a Mrs Rowlands, says it's urgent'). But then one got through, and this time there were no tears. I went round to see a divorcee in her late fifties, living alone in a council flat twelve storeys up in a tower block above Hampstead, who was more annoyed than upset ('Ooh, the bugger'). She too had met him at a tea dance, for there was one thing about such places, she said, they did allow one to meet people, and she coloured slightly at this, implying the word covered a great deal. Her children having left home, she had begun to find life lonely.

Of course, I thought, tea dances, afternoon ballrooms: the perfect hunting ground for a sexual predator, the women would be of a certain age, and lonely. 'And they're that surprised,' a sergeant in the Scotch Guards who had stalked them in such places told a friend of mine, 'they put their hearts and their airses into it.'

My hostess made tea. She was a rather nice, well made-up woman with little lady-like ways (after the 'bugger' she had said, 'I don't know what made me say that'), but there was a toughness there. She said that if he got in touch again she would ask him round, and, if she could get him off guard, would take a photograph of him, which she would send me.

She showed me a poem he had sent, addressed to her. It was, and is (for I still have this too), written in sloping capitals.

> Lately my life has lacked the light
> Until you came, a star so bright
> Your very nearness warms my heart,
> Once more my life begins to start,
> Your happy bubbling ~~ever~~ effervesence (*sic*)
> Warms – draws me to your prescence (*sic*).

She gave this to me, saying she didn't want to see it again. Seduction is one thing; poetry, however bad, hurts.

A fortnight later she phoned to say she had the photograph. I have this too. Caught in flashlight, a man, leaning on a door frame, is grinning at the camera. He is thin, pale, not bad looking, but with the sort of eye-teeth for which Christopher Lee needed a make-up artist: they are the very long, very white teeth of a vampire. But what had made her cross, she said, was how perfectly at ease 'the creature' had been.

'I know who asked you to do this.'

'Yes, and he's getting a print.'

'Poor old Byron, I knew he was after me, but there's nothing at all he can do about it.'

Still it must have worried him, for the letters and the phone calls stopped.

But the strangest development of all has just taken place. When I started on what you have been reading I got in touch with a friend of mine to check some of the details; now living in retirement in Cornwall, she was on the Magazine with me. A fortnight later she rang me.

'I can hardly believe this, it's the most extraordinary thing. I was telling a lady who's just moved down here from London about that chap who used to pretend he was you, and we were both roaring with laughter when I must have mentioned the name Byron Rogers, for suddenly she stopped laughing. She said, "Omigod, not him."

'If it's the same man, in the 1980s her mother had an affair with him. I gather they were all a bit worried at the time. But her mother's coming down at the weekend, I'll ask her.'

A few days later she rang again. 'It *was* him. I told the mother your story, and she was startled for everything checked out. Everything. Her daughter even teased her about whether he'd been a bit of a mover and shaker in the bedroom department, but all the old lady said was, "Yes." Perhaps you'd better not bring that up. Oh yes, I forgot, she's agreed to talk to you.'

This is her story.

> In the 1980s I was in my fifties, separated from my husband and working as a housekeeper/caretaker in this block of flats in Mayfair. And every Monday night I and some friends used to go

dancing at the Café de Paris. Monday night was Ladies' Night. And that's where I met him. He was tall and dark, had prominent teeth, I remember that, and was very likeable. He told me he worked for newspapers. In fact he had a whole briefcase full of his articles, sorry, *your* articles, for whatever you say about him, he was your number one fan. He must have cut out everything you wrote.

And even at the beginning that struck me as a bit odd. I didn't know any writers, but I didn't think they carried old articles around with them. Not to dances anyway. God, this makes me sound such a twit. Of course later you wrote columns, and your photograph began to appear, which would have put a stop to everything. All this is very sad, don't you think?

He had this wonderful knowledge of London. We used to go for long walks together. And suddenly there was all this sex. I'm not sure how it started, I mean I'm a bit of a prude and I'd sworn when my marriage broke up that would be it as far as I was concerned, so I was more startled than anything. It wasn't as though he was physically attractive, and I always used to put him in the bath beforehand. But the sex was . . . amazing. Not that he did anything out of the ordinary, it was just that it was . . . that's the only word for it . . . amazing.

The only thing was that at no time did he mention anything to do with writing, and that's when I started to get suspicious. Then he asked me to his flat, which was in Harrow and very small. And there were no books in it, just paintings of animals on black velvet, and the only furniture a crumbling old sofa. That's when I confronted him, and he admitted it. Said he was a misfit, that he'd been sexually abused by an aunt when he was a boy. So he said. And then he told me that what he really did was manage a bookshop in the Charing Cross Road. Only there were

no books in his flat. That's when I told him to piss off. I mean, even booksellers must read books sometime. It was so sad. And silly. I don't think there was any harm in him, but there are people like that, they can't bear to be ordinary.

I thought it was all over, and then years later I saw this drawing of a man's face in the *Evening Standard*. A man's body had been fished out of the Thames, and the police were trying to identify him. And it was him, I'm sure it was him, it was an uncanny likeness. I know I should have gone to a police station, but I couldn't face it somehow. It sounds daft, but I couldn't face getting involved again, even with him dead.

Suddenly it wasn't a matter of women wailing for their demon lover. To have invited her home would have been a major departure for him, so he must have fallen for her in a way he hadn't for any of the others, not one of whom even had his address. It must have been the one time he had stepped out of character, and he, who had stepped in and out of so many lives and disappeared, was himself made to disappear.

Her description of the flat was so vivid, the emptiness of the room, those awful paintings on black velvet, the tigers and elephants you saw for sale in street markets at the time, to which, his briefcase bulging with cuttings (I was churning the stuff out in those days), he came home each night. Well, most nights. And the effect on me was complex.

Shock had long ago given way to irritation, largely at not finding myself centre stage in my own life, but then this too had given way to awe. I suppose I had come to revel in the adventures of my secret sharer, this Mr Hyde of the Tea-dances. For I had never received such letters, I had never had that effect on anyone, and with me partings had always been messy affairs, mostly on

station platforms and, once, in the Romano-British section of a research library. And these were partings which were usually reversed a fortnight or so later, which meant there were other station platforms, other libraries.

We had shared so much, he and I, except he got the ecstasy, I got the recriminations. As to the rest, I knew nothing about him, what he did, where he came from (though one of the ladies had mentioned South Africa). To me he was this long peep-show of Gina, of Gilly and Angie (and why had the husband not been surprised to come on the two of them naked with the dog?), and the others, only they disappeared as I approached the glass, and there was just me peering in.

When someone steals your credit card, and you need to check your statements, you are confronted by the patterns of your spending. But when someone steals your identity you are confronted by that identity as you find yourself staring at it, and in this case not alone but in company.

Just one thing, sir, have you any idea why he should want to pretend he was you? And then something I have forgotten to mention. The evening I went round to collect the photograph from the lady in the Hampstead tower block, I found myself staring at it and then at her. 'What's he like? Is he anything like me at all?'

She hesitated for a moment. 'No, he's nothing like you at all, dear. I'm not sure how to put this. Well . . . he's sophisticated.'

I don't know who he was – or where he is, if in fact he is alive – but if anyone is responsible for this book it is a man with long white teeth grinning in a doorway. Because of him I had found myself in a film in the production of which I had played no part. And the biggest shock of appearing on screen for the first time,

the director Bryan Forbes once told me, is seeing yourself walk away. It makes you think about yourself in a way you never have before.