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The Truth

Written by Michael Palin

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THE TRUTH

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‘Gertrude, truth is a very complex thing’

OSCAR WILDE, *An Ideal Husband*

PART I

*

The Problem

Keith Mabbut was a writer. Of that he was convinced. He lived in London on two floors of a red-brick, gabled house in Upper Holloway. He would have preferred to have lived nearer to the heart of the capital, but needs must and he was only a short walk from Finsbury Park station and on a good day could be at the British Library within thirty-eight minutes of leaving home. He lived with Stanley the cat, and Julia, his daughter, who was nineteen and known to all as Jay. He had another child, Sam, who was training to be an actor and didn't live at home. Mabbut and his wife Krystyna, who was Polish, were separated. Mabbut's father and mother had died quite some time ago, within a year of each other. He had an older sister, Lucy, who lived in Australia.

Though he had made a career out of the written word, and indeed had a British Gas Award to show for it, he had reached the age of fifty-six with nothing resembling the success of his great literary heroes, George Orwell and Albert Camus, both of whom had died in their forties. Setting aside the clear, if unpalatable, correlation between genius and early death, he had formed the opinion that his best work was yet to come. And in a way he least expected, so it was.

ONE

The atmosphere at breakfast in the Stratsa House Hotel was as overcast as the skies outside. Regret seemed to have the upper hand over expectation; yesterday, rather than today, seemed uppermost in people's minds. This was certainly true in Keith Mabbut's case. He had completed his history of the Sullom Voe oil terminal and his work on Shetland was over. In three hours he would be flying out of Sumburgh for the last time.

He examined the buffet. It was always the same but he lived in hope that one day a fruit compote might appear, or a thick Viking muesli, or just anything not in a packet. Today there was less than usual. Not even a banana. He slit open a small bag of Alpen, which he tipped into a bowl, adding some yogurt, a spoonful of raisins and a dried fig.

He ordered tea and took his usual corner table by the window, looking out towards the sea.

A middle-aged couple, two single men sitting separately, and a lone female with bobbed blonde hair and a very large book were the only other occupants of the thickly carpeted, curtain-swagged restaurant and bar known as the Clickimin Suite, named after a loch on the outskirts of Lerwick. One thing he'd miss about Shetland was the joyful exuberance of the place names. Spiggie, Quarff, Muckle Flugga, Yell and Gloup, the Wart of Scousburgh, the Haa of Funzie and the Bight of Ham. Beside these, Lerwick itself, derived from the original Norse, *Leir Vik*, meaning 'a muddy bay', seemed disappointingly mundane.

Gales had blown hard across the muddy bay this last week, but had dropped quite suddenly overnight, and instead of the customary rattling of the windows, the only sounds in the Clickimin Suite this

morning were the buttering of toast and the low gurgle of the coffee machine. Up in his room, Keith's bag was packed and ready to go.

Last night the oil company had given a party at Rani's, an Indian restaurant at the northern end of the harbour, to celebrate the completion of his book, which was to be called *Triumph In Adversity. The Official History of the Sullom Voe Oil Terminal*. Commissioned by NorthOil, one of the consortium of ownership companies, to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the start of production at the terminal, the book had been the brainchild of the Edinburgh office, therefore never wholeheartedly endorsed by the local management, who preferred to get on with their work with as little fuss as possible. So the fact that Howard Michie, the chief manager at NorthOil, had a prior engagement was not unexpected, and it was his senior assistant manager, Kevin O'Connolly, who had been deputed to attend on his behalf. Mabbut didn't like O'Connolly at all. He was a professional Scotsman, parading a hard-bitten Glaswegian mythology as transparent as glass. There were also familiar faces from public affairs – Harry Brinsley and Sheila O'Connell, both young, bright and woefully underemployed – as well as Roscoe Gunn from Planning, tall and tedious, Laurie Henneck from Accounts, Rob Taggart, who had been taken off development to co-ordinate collection of all the material Mabbut might require, and last of all, Mae Lennox from Human Resources, who was responsible for seeing that Keith was paid and housed while he was up in Shetland.

When he had made his first visit sixteen months earlier, Mabbut had been struck by how little was known about the terminal, whose input and output had, after all, transformed the British economy. In the local bookshops there were shelves devoted to fishing and birdwatching and local music; there were three or four histories of the Shetland Bus, an operation which had used the island's fishing boats to assist the Norwegian resistance in the Second World War, but the few books on the oil industry were long out of print. The smart and comprehensive new Museum of Island Life, itself paid for by oil revenues, had several displays of Neolithic stone dwellings and only one devoted to the source of the windfall that had changed the inhabitants' way of life. The Shetlanders' reticence about their riches had rather encouraged Mabbut. Embarrassed at first by the lowliness

of the commission he'd accepted, he began to see a role for himself, not as a company man, but as an outsider who could write honestly and objectively about what Sullom Voe really meant to Shetland. Pretty soon he realised this was not what was required. Oil companies, traditionally secretive, were, after disasters like the spill in the Gulf of Mexico, compulsively paranoid, and NorthOil was no exception.

As security was tightened at the thousand-acre complex forty miles to the north of Lerwick, it was made increasingly clear to Mabbut that he was being paid to accentuate the positive. References to the chaotic early days of construction when an imported workforce was quartered on a desperately unprepared island, or the IRA bomb that went off on the day the Queen officially opened the place, or the two potentially catastrophic oil spills that happened near by, were discouraged or simply struck from his text. Some of the local managers had made their objections to the book personal. Not only was Mabbut seen as an outsider – what they called up here a 'soothmoother', one who had come into Lerwick harbour from its southern mouth – he also had form as that most despised of the breed, an environmental journalist.

Kevin O'Connolly prided himself on his informal, folksy style. He was a reformed alcoholic and had been a company man since his teens. As steaming dishes of biryani, murgh massallam and rogan josh were brought to the table, he clapped his hands for silence.

'Before you all get stuck into your curries, I'd like to say thank you on behalf of NorthOil to Keith and all those who've helped him produce this book about what we're all doing up here. Especially for those who were never quite sure.'

Laughter.

'The oil business is blamed for just about everything these days and it's nice to read some good things about ourselves, like the fact that we turned a peat bog into the biggest oil terminal in Europe within four years, and that we've kept it running day and night for thirty years. If the Greenies had their way, we'd be a peat bog again, but thankfully we have someone like Keith to tell our side of the story, and it's a great story that we can all be proud of. So on behalf of the company, and I know our managing director would join

me in this, I'd like to thank Keith for doing a grand job – for a Sassenach . . .'

Nervous laughter.

'. . . in capturing the skill, the enterprise and the resilience that Sullom Voe has embodied these past thirty years. If you want to be reminded of how important our business is and how well it's doing, this will be the book for you to read. And we all look forward to receiving our free copy.'

Laughter again.

'So thank you, Keith.'

He reached down and picked up something that Rob Taggart had slipped on to his chair.

'. . . and from all of us at NorthOil, we'd like you to accept this as a wee token of our thanks.'

'A lifetime security pass!' shouted someone, which raised a good laugh; 'a Scottish passport!', which raised an even better one. In fact the present turned out to be an all-weather jacket, as worn on the rigs, with 'NorthOil' picked out in bold yellow capitals across the back of it. Not something Mabbut could see himself wearing to the next Greenpeace meeting.

He gave a short reply, short because he was unable to express how frustrating it had been writing the book, knowing that every manager on the site was breathing down his neck. O'Connolly made his apologies and left shortly afterwards, giving Mabbut a powerful handshake – he was not the sort of man for a bear-hug. The atmosphere relaxed. The food was good and, knowing that the company was paying, those who stayed moved from beer to wine and even some curious Indian *digestif* that Rani produced from a back cupboard. Mabbut fell into a long conversation with Laurie from Accounts, who had lived on the island all her life and was desperate to get away and see the world. She'd never been to London, and no matter what Mabbut told her about it, she still wanted to go. As the evening wore on, those who lived out of Lerwick bade their farewells and began to drift off. Soon only Mabbut, Roscoe Gunn and Mae Lennox were left. Roscoe was a dour man on whom alcohol appeared to have no effect at all. He was, however, that even more deadly combination, a dour man who likes company, and it was long

past midnight before he shook Mabbut's hand one final time and headed off into the night. Mabbut waited for Mae Lennox to settle up. As they stepped out on to Bank Lane the sky was wonderfully clear and a small crescent moon hung so sharp and bright above the bay that neither felt they could turn their backs on it. Instead they walked down towards the waterfront, where the outline of a recently docked Norwegian three-master rose against the night sky. They turned south along Commercial Street, whose solid and sturdy old manses ran parallel to the sea, which lapped gently at the flights of stone steps leading from the houses to the water.

Of all those he had met during his work at Sullom Voe, Mae was the person he'd miss most. She was in her mid-forties and had never been married, except to her work. She must have had offers because she was lively and bright and looked good, without ever seeming to put in much effort. They'd spent a lot of time together and grown fond of each other, but whereas her friendliness had been chummy rather than intimate, his feelings were more complicated.

'Walk to the Knab?'

Mae feigned horror.

'The Knab! I've to be at work in the morning, Mr Mabbut.'

'It's my last night.'

'I've not got the right shoes on.'

'I'll carry you.'

Mae snorted with laughter and looked up at the sky.

'Well, we'll go a little way more. It's a rare old evening.'

They pulled up their coat collars as they cleared the protective walls of the houses and the wind caught them straight off the water. At the top of the next hill they found cover again, in the lee of an ill-starred assortment of modern bungalows and large stone houses with pointy roofs. A roller-coaster path led down between them to a low cliff and then wound up again past a cemetery. Serried ranks of silver tombstones stretched up the slope, like a silent army watching them. Neither spoke until they'd reached the headland known as the Knab, where a small shelter had been provided as part of a tourist trail. Here they sat, looking out into the star-studded night with the silver-grey waters of the Sound rippling gently below.

Mae flicked her hair free of her collar.

'I feel like a teenager again.'

Mabbut put his arm around her, protectively and companionably, but with enough pressure to feel her compact shape between waist and ribcage.

'I can't remember that far back.'

She turned towards him.

'Are you looking for sympathy or something? Look at me. Halfway through my forties already.'

'Ah, but you still have a lot of life ahead of you, Mae. Most of mine is behind me.'

'Oh, don't give me that. What are you? Fifty-six?'

'You should know, you're the one who employed me.'

'Fifty-six is nothing.'

'It's nothing times fifty-six,' said Mabbut bleakly.

Ahead of them, a few clouds were drifting above the southern horizon.

'If someone had said to me on the journo course that, by the time I was pushing sixty, I'd be being thanked by an oil company for making them look good, I'd have left and become a toilet attendant.'

'Thanks a lot.'

'You know what I mean. It's nothing personal. Just a nagging reminder that success is something that happens to other people.'

Mae shook her head impatiently.

'There you go again, Keith. Always beating yourself up.'

'I'm not the only one beating me up. You remember what O'Connolly said when I came up with all that interesting stuff about the early days and the local council being told one thing and the oil company doing another? "They were troublemakers, Keith, people who dinnae know a gift horse when it sits on their heed." That's what he said.'

Mae gave a short laugh.

'We've done all right out of it.'

Mabbut snorted angrily.

'Oh, sure, but only because some of you caused trouble. Made the companies pay up. But they wouldn't let me put that in the book.'

A cloud flitted across the moon and the sea turned from silver to black.

'You know, Mae, I sometimes have this dream that I'm walking across a bridge at rush hour and everyone else is coming the other way.'

'You make things difficult for yourself. You don't have to do that. None of us is perfect, you know.'

'I'm not talking about perfect, Mae, just honest reporting. I've given them what they wanted, but it wasn't what I wanted.'

This wasn't what he wanted either. Not with Mae Lennox, not on his last night on Shetland. He tried a grin but didn't quite convince.

'I'm sorry, Mae. It's my despair gene. There's nothing I can do about it.'

He turned, leaning in close to her.

'I'll miss you, Mae.'

'I'll miss you too.'

He moved his arm lightly across her shoulder.

'Come to London.'

Mae laughed, a little more heartily than he'd have liked.

'Me? No. I promised my mother I'd never go south of Berwick-on-Tweed.'

'I'm not joking. I'm serious.' He pulled away. 'Come to London. Come and live with me.'

Mae stopped, laughed, shook her head then laughed again.

'Why not? It would be wonderful. We get on so well. You understand me, Mae.'

'*Why not?* Because you're a married man for a start. Are you going to keep me in a wee room somewhere?'

Mabbut was aware of the silence around them. The moon had disappeared, and the wind too.

'Just a silly thought,' he said.

She leaned across and kissed his cheek.

'We've both had a lot to drink.'

'That's why I can tell you these things, but it doesn't mean I've just thought of them . . .'

Mabbut broke off. Staring into the inky darkness, he took two deep breaths.

Mae put her hand on his.

'You're a good man, Keith Mabbut. You should remember that more often.'

They sat for a moment, neither speaking. Mae peered out of the shelter.

'Weather's changing.' She checked her watch and got rapidly to her feet. 'And it's two o'clock!'

They walked back into the town. As they passed the Point, a different wind hit them, a north wind so brisk and searching they had to huddle close, which is how they were when they stopped at the bottom of the short, steep alleyway that led to Keith's hotel.

He gave her a long last hug.

'I hope we'll see each other again, Mae. One way or another.'

'Me too.'

'A night of rapture in Berwick-on-Tweed?'

She smiled, squeezed his hand and turned away, walking quite briskly up Commercial Street, her heels clicking on the flagstones. He watched her for a while, but she didn't look back.

The first flecks of early morning rain pattered across the windows of the Clickimin Suite.

'Cooked breakfast this morning, sir?'

Waking from his reverie, Keith noticed a cheerful Filipino standing beside him with a notepad.

Mabbut shook his head.

'No, no thank you.'

He peered out of the window. He could just make out the sea between the trees and the garages. He was glad he hadn't told Mae the full truth about Krystyna last night, although he couldn't stop himself wondering what the effect might have been if he had.

It was three days ago now that he'd heard the news. He'd spent the morning cooped up at the terminal running last-minute checks on things like surge-tank capacity and pre-fabrication ratios, and he was heading back from the Voe when his mobile had sounded. It was Krystyna. Since the split, these calls had followed a fairly strict and regular pattern: Monday evenings around eight, basic information exchanged, emotion avoided, all over in less than ten minutes.

So this was an exception. Her voice was a little highly pitched too. She had asked him if he was able to talk, and he had pulled off the road on to the cinder-track driveway of a small, whitewashed farmhouse. It had been one of the island's better days, a late afternoon breeze barely troubling the clouds in a bright blue sky.

His wife delivered her message succinctly. She had met a man. There was mutual attraction and he had asked her to go and live with him. At the moment she was still sharing a flat with their son Sam, but it wasn't altogether satisfactory and she intended to accept the offer.

Mabbut took this in, his attention distracted by a pair of sea eagles straight ahead of him, slowly dipping and rising on the air currents. He thanked her for letting him know, and with a clumsy attempt at insouciance asked why she had thought it so important to ring him now. And that was when she had told him that she wanted a divorce.

This shouldn't have been a shock. They had been apart for so long that he'd begun to see their separation as a sort of bond between them. Not being able to live together was something only the two of them shared. The day before he'd bought her a rather expensive Shetland wool sweater. She was never easy to buy for, but this one, with its traditional wave-like pattern and delicate combination of greys and pale blues, had been just up her street. Giving it to her would have confirmed that there was still some business as usual, apart from just the children.

Not wanting to go back to the hotel, he had retraced his journey along the road as far as Brae, a village grown into a small town as a result of its proximity to the terminal. Oil money, skilfully extracted from the companies by a dogged council, had provided a new school and a leisure centre that a town twenty times its size would have been proud of. An area of bright new Scandinavian-style homes, nicknamed Toytown by the locals, had advanced up the hillside. New restaurants and shops had opened to service them. The previous winter Mae had rented one of them for Keith, so he'd be closer to the terminal on those days when the sun sank at three and didn't reappear until ten the next morning.

Instead of going straight on to the terminal, he took a secondary road to the west, across the narrow bridge that led to a rocky,

red-granite island. Driving on until the road ended, he'd walked the half-mile or so that led to the edge of the cliffs. He had sat down on a grass-tufted ledge and looked out to sea. Across the water lay the convoluted outlines of the islands of Papa Little and Vementry. To the west, the Atlantic stretched away, unbroken, until it reached the coast of Greenland. Gulls wheeled and cried as the waves rushed and sucked at the shiny black rocks two hundred feet below him.

Krystyna Woniesjka had been one of the students on a creative writing course that he'd taught at Leeds back in the early 1980s. Mabbut, a voracious reader from early childhood, had started writing stories as soon as he could spell. At Huddersfield Grammar he'd vied with a boy called Clive Attwell for top honours in English. Attwell had been a winner in every way and ended up with an Exhibition to Cambridge. Mabbut, the better writer, had ended up at the University of Hull, where some brooding resentment at the way things had turned out drew him towards politics. After three years as a minor firebrand he secured a second-class degree and a place at the local school of journalism. It took him a further three years to realise that his politics were lukewarm, more about reaction than action. Then, thanks to a good friend's wife, with whom he'd had a very brief affair, he found himself applying, successfully, to be the first creative writing tutor at Leeds Polytechnic. He'd had a patchy history with girlfriends. He fell for women easily, and his choices had generally been unfortunate. He was more of a romantic than a predator, and it had taken him quite a time, and some unhappiness, before he realised that Krys was different from the rest. She was Polish for a start, the youngest of six children, and daughter of an air force couple who'd stayed on in England after the war. What had attracted him at first had not been her looks but her defiance. Unlike her English counterparts she was unapologetic about everything she did. If she'd made a mistake or a misjudgement her chin would go up and her black eyes would flare like those of some dangerously wounded animal. This put a lot of people off, but for someone like Mabbut, who was good at argument but bad at confrontation, it was irresistibly appealing. So much so that he began deliberately to find fault with her work in order to provoke the desired reaction. On one occasion she had been so angry at his comments that she had

demanded a personal interview with Mabbut and his superiors to discuss her grievances. Mabbut managed to steer her away from an official hearing, but agreed to meet her out of college hours to discuss it.

It turned out that her tendency to intransigence was as much of a cover as his tendency to conciliation. With five siblings, life for Krystyna had been a constant battle, as had growing up with an unspellable Polish name in a rural English village. Finding a similar taste in books and films, they began to go out together. Physical intimacy had been the very last thing to happen, but when it did it was good in a way Mabbut had not known before and he fell very deeply in love with the difficult, contrary, utterly unique woman that fate had sent his way. The attraction he held for her was more enigmatic. She didn't really discuss things like that. She wasn't philosophical or particularly curious (which made her a rotten creative writer) but his considered, more thoughtful approach to things tempered her fiery nature and with him she found that there was less to be indignant about. She looked glorious on their wedding day and he felt proud, privileged and relieved that his life finally had some meaning. They had vowed to love each other as long they both should live.

Mabbut had been staring down at the ocean without really focusing, and when he raised his eyes and looked beyond the shore, he could see that the water was covered with whitecaps. A gull-wing of dark grey cloud was approaching fast from the west. It was a dramatic sight and he was tempted to sit and watch it, but he knew these Shetland storms could beat about for hours, so he stood, bracing himself for a moment against the wind, before stumbling back to the car.

By the time he had returned to Lerwick the full fury of the storm had struck the island, so he had sat in the hotel car park, turned off the engine and watched the rain as it streamed down the windscreen.

Many times since they had split up Mabbut had prodded about in his memory, trying to dig out the moment when he knew it had all gone wrong, as if that might give him the key to make sense of all the other evidence. So far he had found nothing. There were memories of angry, hurtful words, even tantrums on occasion, but

none of them was The One. The only explanation he could find lay in a process that, now he came to think of it, had begun as soon as they met. They had changed their behaviour to suit each other. Krystyna had become less volatile and he had become less apologetic. This had suited them for a long time, even made them pretty good parents, but at some point it had begun to turn into something negative. Krys, as he always knew, was bright, and with the chippiness rubbed off, she was also charming and popular. Once the children were at school she began to take on secretarial work, at home to start with, then later in offices. Thanks to a colleague of Mabbut's she became first secretary and then general assistant to one of the big fish in the Transport Union. From being steadily employable, she became positively sought after, working for some important committees, poached by the occasional MP with a book to write. He, on the other hand, her erstwhile teacher, had had a much more volatile career. He had made some headway as an environmental journalist, and become quite well thought of. His exposure of a water company involved in releasing toxic discharge into a local river brought him an award and some notoriety, but when he tried to follow up this success, he found many of the old doors closed. Refusing to accept that his days of exposing major scandals might be over, he became increasingly stubborn and unapologetic – ironically, the very qualities that had first attracted him to Krystyna. So their roles changed. She became the one doing the comforting, while he became increasingly unpredictable. Mabbut put it down to the fact that life had moved on, journalism had changed and people like himself, writers with a conscience, were increasingly being crowded out by interfering proprietors and pusillanimous editors. The Thatcher years had knocked the stuffing out of people. They didn't want uncomfortable exposure. They wanted consensus and job security. And, like everyone else, they wanted more things.

After many pub lunches with an ever-decreasing band of like-minded colleagues, Mabbut had convinced himself that it was time to provoke by other means. While the bills were, just about, being paid by work for newspaper supplements and company reports, his mind began to turn to his first love, fiction. He'd taught it, he'd met

his wife through it, but he'd never had the self-belief to write it himself. Instead he'd been lured back to journalism, and look where he'd ended up. Now, before it was too late, it was time to correct the course of his life.

He had started working on ideas during the Shetland winter and had come up with something that had surprised and excited him. Something bold and ambitious in scope, a project that would need time and care and attention, but which, if it worked, could be breathtaking. He had made it quite clear to his agent that this time he would not compromise truth and integrity by selling himself to the highest bidder. He would use what savings he had from selling out to business to buy the time he needed to nurture this new work.

Krys, meanwhile, had begun to enjoy the rewards of her practical good sense and efficiency, and could not understand why he could not simply buckle down and do the same thing. All that he found so stifling she found both stimulating and usefully lucrative. For a while her orderly success made her tolerant of his wayward ambitions, but as the children left school and wanted things that their father could no longer afford, she found herself having to bear more and more of the burden. The money she made from her hard work should have bought her the little luxuries she saw friends and colleagues taking for granted. Instead it was now funding a mortgage on their son's flat and a university course for their daughter. It wasn't that she didn't respect her husband any more; she no longer understood him. She had settled into life. He hadn't. She demanded practicality, he pleaded creativity. It was an argument they'd had from the moment they met. It was what had brought them together. Now, twenty-five years later, it was pushing them apart.

'Shall I take that, sir?'

Mabbut looked around him. The Clickimin Suite had emptied. The girls were cleaning, wiping and re-laying tables. He finished his tea, paid his bill and with a round of farewells to the staff, stepped out of the Stratsa House Hotel and into the waiting taxi.