

Zooming **By David Silver**

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?” I asked my friend Stephen as usual as the online video meeting session started. He didn’t look right, in fact he looked really odd, far more so than over the last few weeks.

Stephen and I have been playing music together for several years since meeting in West Weyford Works Orchestra. We discovered we had a similar sense of humour and enjoyed playing the same sub-genres of classical music, he on flute and me on clarinet. We had performed duets in public on a number of occasions and the icing on the cake of our relationship, certainly for me, was that he loved the sound of the bagpipes, which I also play, and we’d experimented with some flute and bagpipe duets which we were convinced were well appreciated by our audiences.

Once the Great Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020 began and the March Lockdown prevented in-person meetings, we were determined not to let it stop us practising and enjoying our music. We agreed to have a weekly videoconference to keep ourselves in touch with our artform, so every Friday morning at 10:30 I would start up a Zoom meeting and we’d play. Well, we’d have quite a long chat first about anything and everything, musical or non-musical; our favourite topics would centre around having a laugh at the latest shenanigans of the political classes or the comical antics of people we knew. As a retired policeman he had a particularly acerbic view on life. But how we would laugh when I’d suggest that with his experience of pounding the pavements carrying a big stick, he should join the fourth emergency service and become a Morris dancer. For reasons I could never fathom he was never tempted.

And now he divided his time between music and volunteering at a parachute museum where members of the public could learn about the history of these devices, how they were constructed, how they were packed and deployed, and the consequences when they failed to deploy. Some of the exhibits’ patches of dried fluids and fragments of embedded tissue and bone helped to demonstrate the velocities and g-forces involved in these cases.

The museum offered its regular visitors a discounted and popular package which included tuition, insurance, a one-way-only flight up to 4000 metres and a return journey by parachute. The highlight of the package was a pre-flight meal in the Museum’s cafeteria (reassuringly named ‘The Last Jump’) with a voucher entitling the bearer to ‘All You Can Eat’. Surprisingly the customers didn’t seem to avail themselves of the tempting array of sausage rolls and artfully curled cheese sandwiches that were invariably on offer - a glass of water and a visit to the lavatory seemed to suffice for most.

Anyway, the weeks seemed to fly by. In the strange bland world of Lockdown there are no highlights with which to pin memories. Each time I saw Stephen it felt like we had met just yesterday. Every Friday I would start Zoom and there he was, always in the same position in front of his computer, as if he hadn’t moved since the previous week. He presumably felt the same way about me.

We’d been doing this for a couple of months when I began to notice subtle changes in him. He’d appear wearing the same T-shirt which every week was a little more stained, his

unshaven stubble was a little more pronounced, his hair a little more unkempt. He became ever more taciturn, reluctant to engage, and his sense of humour was diminishing. Playing musical instruments on the internet is a bit hit and miss as data packets from one party to another are routed through indeterminate numbers of intervening servers, introducing delays. The delays are usually quite small, perhaps a fraction of a second, enough to spoil the mathematical perfection of a Bach sonata but we'd agreed that it was better having these imperfect sessions than none at all. Nevertheless, I started to experience delays rather out of keeping with the normal. I'd play a phrase, and, sensing that Stephen had perhaps lost his place, I would stop, only to hear his answering phrase come in three or four seconds later, sounding eerily distant and ethereal. "Bloody technology" I'd say to ease any embarrassment he might feel.

Each week it got worse. He became thinner, his clothes sagging, his bones showing through his skin; grey waxy-looking accretions began appearing on his cheekbones. His voice became hoarse and his eyes became lifeless.

"Can you hear me? Can you see me?" I asked him. He made an inner groaning sound and inclined his head slightly. I took that as confirmation that he could see and hear me.

Again he looked as if he hadn't moved from his computer since last week. Same clothes. Same stubble. As I said, he didn't look right, far more so than over the last few weeks. He had lived alone since his wife had left him and gone off with a fireman. I was really worried about him. We stumbled through a semblance of a music session. 'See you same time next week?' I said as I prepared to shut down. There was no answer and I'd accidentally clicked the 'End Meeting' button prematurely anyway.

Later that week came the Great Trauma.

I read an item in the local online newspaper that chilled me to the core. It seems that residents in Green Valley road had complained about a disturbingly bad smell. After the water company had visited the area without finding any problems with the drains, the Police had been called and after some brief detective work a certain Stephen Underwood was discovered dead in his home. His body was found slumped in front of his computer, which was still on. The pathologist estimated he'd been dead for around a month; the computer forensic analysts reported that it looked as if he'd died during an online Zoom meeting with someone. Stephen Underwood. My friend.

A month? But I had last spoken to him on Zoom five days ago. My flesh was creeping and I was frightened witless by the implications that invaded my spinning thoughts. Either my sanity was in question or ... or I didn't know what.

I wasn't sure what I was wishing for most - my sanity being out of kilter or some other horrific explanation, but I had to figure this out. I have always lived on the basis that there is a reason for everything, however strange it may seem, so I resolved to do some investigation of my own. Start from first principles and eliminate the obvious. Clearly there had been some internet mis-routing and identity theft or perhaps there was a hoaxer involved. With the hairs standing on the back of my neck I initiated our Zoom meeting again. Only Stephen would have known the credentials and password.

To my shock and horror my computer screen flickered slightly as it does when someone is joining a meeting. With my stomach churning I thought, I hoped, I would see his daughter or perhaps a policeman or police technician working in his home.

No. It was Stephen, outlined against a black background. His skin was yellow and falling off the bones which punctured it, his jaw hanging down, eyes rolling, a hollow groan escaping his gaping maw and blackened teeth. "Caaan yooooou eeear meee" he - it - intoned. Maggots moved in his hair.

I screamed.

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