

On the Train Towards Tralfamadore

Pamela Smithers

Billy sat quietly in the doctor's office; which really was not an office at all, but an abandoned train carriage that the doctor claimed had been a gift from Europe.

'You know, when it stopped moving forward,' he had said of it.

Staring out of the window behind the doctor, Billy considered the space that the train now occupied. A field stretched before them, peppered here and there with tiny flowers that grew in isolated little clumps; but they were feeble, and easy to overlook.

Beyond the field stretched a road, with a stream of cars disappearing into the distance. They moved slowly in a long line. Strapped to the roof of a small red car was a giant missile, pointing rudely at the heavens. The men inside the car – dressed in formal suits and ties – were dancing in their seats as though loud music were playing. When the missile was launched everybody would be able to hear it and could join them in their dancing. But from this distance it looked ridiculous.

'So you have come to me for guidance?' asked the doctor, staring at Billy.

As he spoke his eyes moved from his patient to a small, framed mirror upon his desk. He finished the question while considering the mirror, staring quizzically at it as though it had tricked him somehow¹. Shifting his gaze back to Billy he demanded abruptly,

'Why would you think that I have it?'

Billy thought silently for a moment, wondering how to put it into words.

'Because of a feeling really. I have become unstuck again, unstuck in time². Only this time I can't tell if I've moved forwards or backwards. I thought you might know?'

He finished simply, waiting for an answer. The doctor considered Billy silently for a moment; a grown man sitting still in his chair like an uncomfortable child, unsure where to rest his hands. Then the doctor stood abruptly, and spun to face the window, his arms flying out emphatically.

'My dear fool, the world is unstuck! We're all unstuck! Look at that traffic jam out there, everyone in it is stuck! Especially that fool with the missile.'

Billy, still seated at the doctor's desk, looked to where the doctor was pointing. A group of young people had surrounded the red car, and they too had started dancing. But they were dressed in flowers and held signs and

danced more angrily than the men in the car had. The men in the car had stopped dancing and now watched through the windows, annoyed expressions marking their faces. They poked their tongues out at the protestors, and talked animatedly amongst themselves. The doctor shook his fist at the line of traffic in the distance, and rounded once more to face Billy, a frustrated expression lining his face.

‘Perhaps what you are suffering from is not really the trauma of the war, but the trauma of the world. It is just that you have been unfortunate enough to have seen it.’

The doctor studied Billy silently for a moment, before turning back to the mirror and nodding emphatically at himself.

Billy had no words with which to respond; he sat silently, staring at what looked like a dress draped over the back of a chair in the corner, just behind the doctor. From where Billy sat, it looked almost like the parachutes he had seen in the war. Although then it had been useless to have a parachute, since even when he had flown away from the war he had ended up here, where another one was taking place. But he thought it would look nice on the doctor, with his elegant gestures and curly hair, and wondered privately to himself why more men didn’t wear dresses. On Tralfamadore the aliens had not.

‘I must say that I like it here,’ the doctor said all of a sudden, in a much more amiable tone. ‘The aliens are out in droves, not hiding underground as they used to.’

‘Aliens?’ repeated Billy hopefully, moving forwards on his seat, a little closer to the doctor.

The doctor fixed him with a piercing stare, as though he knew exactly what Billy was thinking.

‘Aliens aren’t just a symptom of space travel Billy,’ he said mysteriously, ‘just look out there, there are multitudes of them. Only they won’t admit it.’

The doctor gestured once more towards the scene beyond the window behind him³. Billy again had nothing to say, so instead he asked meekly,

‘What would you recommend doctor? What is your diagnosis?’

After a moment of thought the doctor scoffed into his jacket, a sardonic smile upon his face.

‘A diagnosis? Why what useless things they prove to be! What should I say of you Billy, which I should not say of the world? What can be found in you that cannot be found in the Grand Canyon?!⁴ Or in the bottom of my shoe for that matter?!’

Billy did not know, so he tilted his head and waited, sure that the doctor was going to tell him. The doctor remained silent for a while, his eyes glazing over as he stared into the mirror. Then he spoke briskly, turning the mirror over and laying it flat on his desk.

‘Take a walk Mr Pilgrim. Walk to the busiest intersection you can find, stand at the side of it to watch, and flip a coin as you do so. Look around you and see what fortunes chance bestows upon you and everyone else. And see if anyone objects as you throw your coin into the air. Or better yet, take a nap on a railroad, with a blanket and a pillow – perhaps even bring a pair of slippers – and see when you wake up! That is my advice, if you insist on having some.’

The doctor finished with a frustrated flourish in the direction of the window and the world beyond it. But Billy Pilgrim had stopped listening. He

was travelling through time again, towards a blinding red flash, and the sound of Kilgore Trout, singing what sounded like it might be the Tralfamadorian national anthem.

References

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Fitzgerald, F. Scott 1936 (2008) 'The Crack-Up', *Esquire*, 26th February, viewed 5 April 2014, <<http://www.esquire.com/features/the-crack-up>>.

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About the author

I am currently in my third year of a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in History and English. My experience at La Trobe has been more rewarding than anything I can put neatly into words, and I hope to one day use the research skills developed at university in professional writing and journalism. I intend to begin with Honours in 2015.

¹ In Djuna Barne's novel, Dr Matthew O'Connor is notoriously self-possessed, and very entertaining in his philosophical ramblings. Often, however, they are full of contradictions which he nonetheless always manages to make sense of.

² In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim uses the phrase 'unstuck in time' to describe his experience of what is generally agreed to be a form of post-traumatic stress disorder – or shellshock. His experiences of time-travelling to an alien planet – Tralfamadore – are usually interpreted as symptomatic of his PTSD after having witnessed the bombing of Dresden in 1945. Thus his retreat into Tralfamadore can be understood as a coping mechanism.

³ At this point it might be interesting to consider *The Human Condition* by Rene Magritte, 1933, [oil on canvas], National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. This painting is a useful comparison to the works of Barnes and Vonnegut in how it draws attention to the ways in which our perception of reality is necessarily constructed and influenced by social forces, values, and mores. The painting seems to question the idea of an objective reality, and draws our attention to the ways in which we are limited to our own perspective of the world, in the same way that Billy Pilgrim is held captive by his flashbacks and visions of Tralfamadore.

⁴ See discussion between F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda, in which she comforts his frustration with the consolation that whatever problems exist in him, also exist in the wider world around him. A crack in him is a crack in the Grand Canyon – a miracle of nature – so he needn't carry the weight of it alone. This discussion can be found in the essay 'The Crack-Up.'