

12:30 Lunch with the Zeitgeist

So there I was. And there he was.

Wind back a couple of weeks.

So I'm sitting around at the office trying to work out if I can get fired for sleeping with the work experience girl and I get a call of my editor.

"Hi, I've managed to get you an interview with the Zeitgeist. I'm thinking a short piece in the Sunday Supplement. Obviously it's no recording and no photographs."

Sorry, who?

"He's in town for a couple of days doing some publicity for his book....some kind of thinking man's autobiography thing...typical sh*t. I'm sending you the background file and brief. Good Luck."

This had to be the weirdest stunt he'd ever pulled. Who the hell was this guy?

I opened the background file and found it of almost no use whatsoever as it turns out no one knows who or what he is. Firstly, it was unclear whether I was interviewing *the* Zeitgeist or *a* Zeitgeist as there could be a few of them...or could have been a few of them, maybe. He seemed to be someone who turned up at the most important moments of history and kind of just, well, hung around. The most recent sightings were; May 68'; JFK's assassination; Live Aid (?); the fall of the Berlin Wall and 9/11. And now he pops up again to talk to me? Just another guy trying to sell a book, I guess. That was another thing; all interview questions had to be *strictly relating to the book as no personal questions would be answered*. There was always the chance that whoever it was I was going to interview was just some kind of impostor using the name for attention. I liked this theory.

...

So there I was. The restaurant was busy and we were on a table for two, right in the middle. He arrived late and ordered coffees for us both. I got the picture he wasn't hanging around.

I can't really think how to describe him except to say he was pretty non-descript. He wore a smart but inexpensive suit with a blue striped shirt and red tie. He had short dark hair, average height. The only thing of any note was a thin, elegant moustache sitting on top of his upper lip which contorted to the rhythm of his words. He broke the silence.

"Listen, before we start can I ask that when you write this can you switch round the colours on my shirt-tie combo? My publicist says I wear this one too much." He followed this with a short nervous laugh. This wasn't uncommon; it's something a lot of people get told to do at the start of interviews, a sort of power game. I agreed.

...

“So can you tell me why you decided to write an autobiography?”

His eyes hadn't left the floor since he had sat down at the table. “It's not an autobiography.”

“What is it then?”

“I dunno really, just a collection of thoughts. Something I've wanted to do for a while, I just thought the time was about right.”

“Why now then?”

“I think people are ready to listen.”

“So is this the higher being coming down to influence the people in their hour of need?”

“No. Not when you put it like that. I'm not claiming to be any kind of higher being. I just think I know what the people want, what they need.”

“What do we need then? What do I need?”

“Well, that's what the book is for.”

This wasn't going well. He clearly didn't want to be here. Nothing he was saying was with any conviction. I needed to push him for a reaction.

“Would you like to tell us why you believe you are qualified to advise people and offer them guidance on how they should live their lives? Forgive me, but people don't really know who you are so why should they be listening to you?”

“I don't see how it's any different to what you do. What gives you the right to influence people the way that you do every time you write an article? You can make and break careers with just a few words.”

“People don't have to listen to what I say though. I always encourage people to go out and make their own mind up about things.” This was a blatant lie and he knew it. I don't know how we had gotten to this subject.

“Well, I'm not impressing my view on anyone either. All I'm saying is I've seen a lot of things and I think I understand how people work better than most.”

“So would you say you are using your experience to try and change people for the better?”

“Not really. You see.. people don't really change. Sure, the world changes and people get distracted by different things, eat different things, do different things, and even look different But some things about people never really change. I'm not talking about money, power, knowledge or whatever it is people think they want.It's hard to explain.” He took a sip on his coffee and then

stopped looking at the floor. For one second he looked me straight in the eye. "That's the great irony of it. People are convinced they've changed, that things are better than they were 100 years ago. Humans need to think that they've got better or got worse or whatever because they cant stand the fact that they will never truly break free from their human limits; that's the human condition."

...

He threw some money down on the table and excused himself. We shook hands and he asked if I'd got everything I wanted. I don't think he was listening to my answer but I said yes anyway. He left. I had another interview later anyway. Another guy just trying to sell a book. I looked at my notebook. Two words. Red Shirt.