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“It’s what you deserve”: A.L. Kennedy’s Short Story “Everybody’s Pleased to See You” (2020) and Brexit

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(Written in memory of many conversations I had with Christoph about Brexit.)

“You have to go, you have to be there. Unless you go, you just won’t understand. You’ll see it’s perfect for you, what you deserve” (Kennedy 25). Thus the narrator in A.L. Kennedy’s short story “Everybody’s Pleased to See You”, published in her most recent book, *We Are Attempting to Survive Our Time* (2020), entices us into the text. As this is an *in medias res* beginning, we can, at this stage, have no idea what the narrator is talking about. From the very first line of this short story, we as readers are involved in a guessing game, filling in a multitude of gaps and blanks. While we are beginning to struggle with this task, the narrator frustrates us just one little bit more by bringing up the topic of ignorance:

Of course, if you’re not in the know, you could walk right past and never notice. It isn’t garish or demanding, quite the reverse, it’s somewhere almost infinitely subtle. To the left is an old-school ironmonger’s with a window full of brass. You can tell you’re in a quality neighbourhood just from that. To the right is a tailor’s shop full of tight dress waistcoats and mess jackets having their seams let out. They’ll both let you know that you’re safe, now, somewhere peaceful and permanent. And between the two, quite ready for you, is the Salazar. (Kennedy 25)

We are about to be introduced to a place, and this introduction proceeds via two neighbouring places. The “old-school ironmonger’s” points to a continuity with the past. One cannot help wondering what the objects in the “window full of brass” might be. It is reasonable to assume that these will include locks, bolts and such like, contraptions that are all about controlling access, about keeping people out. The tailor’s shop is equally rich in associations. It appears to specialise in the sort of formal dress worn by a privileged minority, men of a certain age who have physically outgrown the trappings of rank, both civilian (dress waistcoats) and military (mess jackets).

Situated between the brass-bound security of the ironmonger’s and the tailor catering to pillars of the establishment, there is, “quite ready for you, the Salazar” – whatever this may be. Our reading of the text will substantially depend on whether or not the name “Salazar” rings a bell. To some, it might just be an exotic, vaguely Mediterranean name. Others might immediately think of António de Oliveira Salazar (1889-1970), dictator of Portugal from 1933 to 1968 (see Gallagher). As we are still very much in the dark about “the Salazar”, some readers may regard this name as entirely innocent, while others may sense something deeply sinister. Although the narrator talks about being safe, about peacefulness and permanence,

the paraphernalia displayed in the shop windows framing "the Salazar", the locks and bolts as well as the military uniforms can be read as dark hints introducing a note of ambiguity and unease.

It is only in the second paragraph of the short story that we are given an idea of what "the Salazar" is: "It's not a café, not a restaurant, it's there to be home, as permanent and comforting as good order and kings" (Kennedy 25). So this is about a place that is, presumably, more than just a café or a restaurant. It is characterised as safe haven, and this feeling of safety is bolstered up by a conservative vision of the world. It is a place where traditional hierarchies ("good order and kings") prevail.

The narrator then launches into a lengthy and enthusiastic introduction to "the Salazar". Architectural details suggest that its history goes back a long way, and that, over the centuries, new elements were added which have now become venerable antiques: "leaded glass windows", "Georgian double doors" and "art deco metalwork" (25). Everything seems to speak of history and continuity, imbued with "the patina you only find on objects maintained at their peak for lifetimes" (25-26). Its understatement and instant emotional appeal are praised: "You'll take in the whole effect . . . and you'll relax" (25).

Throughout the story, the narrator's tone is conversational, apparently addressing a single person rather than a readership consisting of a multitude of people. There are strong reasons – to be discussed later – for identifying and imagining the narrator as male. He seems to get carried away by his own enthusiasm for what he is talking about, launching into a long monologue, perhaps addressed to a would-be interlocutor who does not manage to get a word in.

The narrator talks to and at the same time constructs the addressee, who, as we shall see, is also very probably to be imagined as being male. This process of constructing the addressee, "the Salazar kind of person" (26), already begins in the first paragraph ("You'll see it's perfect for you . . ."; 25), and it continues throughout the text. Thus, the understated style of the Salazar is made into a character ascribed to the addressee: "A modest brass plate is all that tells you where you are. You're not the type to need anything garish" (26).

The restaurant is located in Chelsea, or rather, it is a nostalgic embodiment of Chelsea as it once was: "The Salazar is sacrosanct, a glorious survival of Old Chelsea, a jewel no one could ever mar, or sell" (26). In this instance, the narrator's elevated register is clearly over the top, which may lead us to treat what he says with caution.

Chelsea is not as it was. . . . For many years, to take one example, it was possible to stroll along Chelsea without socks in winter, to swing about in ragbag clothing, a derelict hat, and be quite unremarkable. You were simply eccentric, artistic, aristocratic, divorced, abandoned, broke, just in that kind of mood – whichever might fit. You were neither

resented nor remarked upon, because you were still Chelsea no matter what. . . . You weren't so badly hurt by your condition, whatever it was, and really very little money could ease you by. Everybody stayed just where they should be. (26)

The narrator's Old Chelsea was a place where dereliction was not really something to worry about because it could very well be a matter of style and therefore of choice. It was, above all, a world exempt from social change, a world in which everybody kept their station according to some kind of pre-ordained hierarchy. The narrator points out that this is now a thing of the past and that Old Chelsea landmarks are gone, places embodying a notion of self-sufficient Britishness, such as "little shops with rails of handmade clothing in British cloth" (26). Although all of this has fallen victim to change (which, to the narrator, is never a good thing), the Salazar "remains to demonstrate that what is truly precious will always remain" (27).

Now that we have been introduced to the Salazar's surroundings, the narrator takes us into its interior. It is very obviously not a place for everybody. The very act of crossing its threshold turns out to be a test that will only be passed by those in the know:

You'll begin your visit with a harmless ritual.

To enter push open the left-handed door. The right-hand door is always latched, as any regular would know. To be foxed by it will make you appear foolish. This is the Salazar's first way of testing visitors. (27)

The narrator comments on how this restaurant creates an atmosphere encouraging its patrons to behave in a certain way:

So press the left-hand fingerplate with a little more force than you'd expect: there's an elderly but mighty spring in place to shut the oak again behind you and it has to be mastered. There's a knack to the motion, which you'll acquire. In a way the Salazar is asking you to be more confident and forceful, to leave apology behind you. No outright shoving, of course, no battering. Brutality would make your fellow patrons stare. After all, the Salazar is British, has British values. (27)

This is where one may begin to suspect that what we have just read might be about more than a restaurant and how to get into it. The description of a simple but powerful mechanism controlling access to a space emphatically described as "British" is likely to prompt a sense of *déjà vu*. It will appear loaded with meaning to anyone familiar with the arguments that made people vote for Brexit, as these were to a significant extent about the promise of controlling access to Britain, and also about much more assertive notions of Britishness. This goes well with some key phrases in this paragraph: "more confident and forceful", "leave apology behind you". The mere presence of the words "battering" and "brutality", together with "forcefulness" and "to leave apology behind you", is significant. They add to an emerging cluster of irritations, such as the locks, bolts, and military uniforms

displayed in the shop windows framing a restaurant whose name, after all, is also that of a dictator.

As we progress further into the story, more significant details establishing analogies with Brexit emerge. Once again, there is a conspicuous presence of defensive mechanisms, separating a cosy space from an uncomfortable outside world: "Enter in winter you'll be faced – just for an instant – by a cosy plum-coloured curtain, drawn *shut* on its rounded track and *defending the interior* from draughts" (27, emphases added).

We learn that this restaurant is staffed by people with foreign-sounding names such as Claude, Marceline, Dominic and Amaranthe (27-28) and that this is in fact a French restaurant. This may at first appear to be very much at odds with the insistent emphasis on the Britishness of this establishment. The narrator deals with this apparent contradiction in a surprising way:

As a new patron you will be escorted into the Salazar's genteel grove of tables, their pure cloths as stiff as justice, their settings immaculate. The bread you will be offered is crisp and warm from the oven, sweet and breathing Paris at you like the arch of a Métro entrance, for this is, inevitably, a French restaurant. We can be better than the French and yet still indulge them, it's the kind of thing that makes the world think well of us. (28)

So the Salazar is a British and therefore a better version of a French restaurant. Once again, a simile put into the mouth of the narrator introduces a sinister note. There are "pure cloths as stiff as justice", which may well make us think of the implacable arbitrary notions of purity and justice that have always been characteristic features of dictatorships.

This British and therefore 'improved' version of a French restaurant evokes a very specific idea of Frenchness, both culinary and otherwise:

The aromatic wraiths of the immortal city in 1914 will surround you, dishes from La Maison d'Or, or La Vachette, or Les Frères Provençal. You will eat from a time-honoured *carte*: plump *escargots* seething in garlic, fat radishes with sea salt, *confit* of duck, rare *fromages fermiers*, *cassoulet de Toulouse* and *steaks frites* with various butters. The Salazar's *pâtisserie* would raise the great Carême from the dead, should he find such a thing convenient. This isn't cultural appropriation, this is refinement, this is translation into common sense. (28)

Much as the Salazar is part of "Old Chelsea", belonging to what the narrator regards as the good old times before things changed for the worse, it is also based on a nostalgic version of *belle-époque* Paris. The year 1914 is significant: this is an imagined Paris, not affected by the changes brought about by two World Wars and the subsequent processes of modernisation that transformed both the social and the physical reality of the French capital. What is more, it is Frenchness "translated into common sense", which implies that French cuisine is really wasted on the French, that it is in need of being refined.

The narrator puts his consummate knowledge of French cuisine on display, employing conspicuously elegant diction and sophisticated vocabulary: “The brothers Chaviero, guardians of the Salazar’s bakery, are *pâtissiers* of thaumaturgical skill. Their *entremets* are constructed from layers of miracles and clothed in mousses as flawless as saints’ hearts, as vulnerably giving as their wounds” (28). Talking about the delights of French pastry made in England, the narrator’s language begins to resemble a heavy sugar coating. However, just then, something unpalatable surfaces from underneath this smooth and shiny surface: “it will all be perfect. It’s important, when so many are starving, to eat well, to appreciate” (29). This casual statement is deeply disturbing, suggesting that the way to react to starvation is not to do something about it but to eat well oneself. On the other hand, this is all of a piece with the narrator’s delight in structures controlling and limiting access, such as the heavy oak door falling shut, propelled by an “elderly but mighty spring” (27), and with his enthusiasm for an unapologetic forcefulness that only just avoids the appearance of brutality.

The Salazar is a place where you are free to follow your whims: “You can, of course, simply appear, reservation-free. The Salazar understands the spontaneous working of your will expresses the spirit of the nation. You will be accommodated” (29). If (and because) you are British, your wish will be the command of the foreign staff. Once again, we encounter a mechanism controlling access: this peculiar French restaurant is implicitly British and *for* the British.

Inside the Salazar, the British Empire does not appear to be a thing of the past – quite on the contrary:

You may also simply opt to be led *starboard*. The Salazar employs naval terms of direction as tribute to a naval race. *Starboard* lie the ox-blood leather booths and the elegant stools ranged along the exquisite Honduran mahogany bar. . . . The long, glistening bar lets you feel what it would be to sip a coffee or an aperitif on the deck of a well-kept day cruiser, or perhaps a picnic boat. You will be put in mind of bright, athletic people in the 1930s, 1890s, or the other decades with real taste. (29)

“Spirit of the Nation”, “naval race” – if you belong here, you do so by birth. The Salazar’s apparent cosmopolitanism is founded on very firm hierarchies. The rest of the world exists to provide fine cuisine (to be improved by British common sense), exquisite exotic raw materials such as Honduran mahogany, and a loyal, subservient workforce: “Mireille, Paul, Augustine, Frank – there are others – they will truly love you, as good servants should” (29). The Salazar is a backward-looking place, and this, according to the narrator, is what makes it attractive. Once again, the decades mentioned here are significant. The 1930s may put us in mind of King Edward VIII’s flirtation with fascism and its fascination with athletic people. This is made perfectly explicit a few pages later when a photograph displayed in the restaurant is mentioned: “Beside them is a dashing snap of Edward VIII

and Mrs Simpson. The Salazar cherishes your culture" (32). The 1890s may point to the heyday of the British Empire and perhaps also to the decadence of the "naughty nineties", neatly combining imperialism and self-indulgence. The Salazar is a place for people who, resenting the modern world in general, would rather prefer to live in this sort of past: "The Salazar understands you and what you need, it knows you feel the chill of a loveless age, of brutal changes and discourtesies" (29).

As the narrator continues to talk about "the Salazar kind of person" (26), the person who would find this place utterly congenial, it emerges more and more clearly that one of the characteristics of that sort of person must be a liking for brutality. "You will feel more yourself, high on your bar stool and well informed by the Salazar's latest mirrors, said to have once reflected the Ceaușescus" (29).

By now it has become clear that, Salazar having been a dictator, the "Salazar kind of person" is someone tolerating or espousing an authoritarian mindset. The "Salazar kind of person" would therefore bask in the past glory of the Ceaușescus, perhaps the most cliché dictator couple in recent history. This restaurant allows its patrons to become, for a little while, would-be dictators in miniature, elevating them (if only high on a bar stool) and offering them a unique opportunity to indulge in a peculiar kind of narcissism. Here they may admire their own reflections in mirrors that once reflected an actual dictator couple. To put themselves in this place, so the narrator insists, gives them a chance to feel they can truly be the person they are at heart.

We have come a long way from the early paragraphs of a text that, in the beginning, appeared to do no more than to sing the praises of a restaurant. By now, the reader has become attuned to spotting the deeply sinister notions that are part and parcel of the narrator's enthusiasm. As the text progresses, the narrator becomes even more enthusiastic and more confident, and the darkness and menace in what he has to say comes to the fore. The following example is a case in point. In this discussion of "Everybody's Pleased to See You", it has been assumed that the narrator is male. Five pages into this short story, we come across the sentence that makes it plausible to imagine the narrator as male, and a male chauvinist to boot: "Somewhere as special as the Salazar doesn't develop by accident; it must be tended like a garden, like a pregnant spaniel, like a new wife" (29). It is clear where the narrator's priorities lie: land, dog, wife, in precisely this order. Note also that a wife needs to be "tended" while "new", and perhaps only then.

Whenever ways of controlling access to this restaurant are mentioned, the Salazar reveals itself more and more as an allegory of Brexit. Those who do not fit in need to be expelled without further ado. "If visitors weren't sometimes asked to leave it would be much harder for anyone else to stay" (29-30). The place allows its patrons to make their own rules, encouraging them to form their own ideas of

reality, or rather, to pick and choose at will from what appears to be a multiplicity of realities.

The Salazar *lifts you above* the usual habits and *realities*. Your plate, the *Victorian* egg trivet, the silver cruet, the linen napkin and the tiny procedures of egg-eating are all joys and *yours by right*. The Salazar reminds you of *your right, your pride and delightful changes in your character can be established*. You will be *returned to your inheritance*, reminded of *the thefts and impositions modern life indulges*. Come to the Salazar and you'll learn to *resist*. (30, emphases added)

Providing the paraphernalia of Victorian luxury, the Salazar suggests that one can, as it were, go back in time, leaving modern life behind, ignoring it because one is heir to an alternative, much more congenial reality. It is as if one could simply opt out of today's world, hoping to resist it simply by living in denial.

This is followed by more references to violence, revisiting the theme of brutality. Once again, something dark and sinister appears from below a sugary or otherwise appealing surface:

The bar also expresses itself in little biscuits – both savoury and sweet – crisp as the commands of finer minds. The chefs make them with such a formidable snap that were they any thicker than a watch glass they'd break teeth. But they are like whispers in your mouth. Like alibis and consciences, they melt. (30)

It is significant that the breaking of teeth is mentioned just after a phrase giving expression to an authoritarian mindset, the idea that those possessed of finer minds are naturally in charge of things, issuing “crisp . . . commands”. The last sentence in this paragraph brings authoritarian attitudes in close proximity with the world of criminals, a world in which alibis and consciences may just melt away. Violence, or rather allusions to violence, clothed in metaphors or similes, always seems to hover discreetly in the background. Here is a characteristic remark the narrator makes a bit later: “The Salazar's waiters – like angels and torturers – can see and perfectly interpret wishes, intentions and hearts” (33).

The idea of the Salazar as a place firmly anchored in a glorious past – and therefore bringing this past back, making it accessible in the present – keeps reappearing as a leitmotif. There seems to be no end to the tangible evidence of this restaurant's venerable past: “Above the bar is a smoke-darkened portrait of Charles Aylward – the Founder – all whiskers and watch chain. He's our kind of person, it's unmistakable” (30).

The Salazar is where the past seems to speak, for instance through old postcards on the wall. It speaks in a comforting way, so comforting that it makes it easy to lapse into a soothing state of utter thoughtlessness. “You may lack a friend for chatting, you may no longer wish to think, the Salazar foresaw this and provides the postcards to divert you” (30-31). We may conclude from this that thinking does not always agree with “the Salazar kind of person”. One of the postcards

pinned to the wall depicts a pop or rock band of the 1970s. For the narrator, it embodies the emergence of the kind of popular culture patrons of this place are encouraged to look down upon:

A heavily scuffed image shows a leather-clad quartet of musicians pouting through an especially orange-aired moment of the 1970s. They are completely unrecognisable and yet familiar as an idea. It's not that one is ignorant of popular culture, it is that one understands it and is disappointed. The band clearly failed without a trace – that's why they're here. The unsuccessful can be petted, like dogs with no pedigree, the Salazar knows that, and knows they exist to remind us that the wrong kind of people shouldn't overreach. (31)

As always, his choice of words is telling. The narrator distances himself from popular culture by talking about the band in a particular way, using the kind of register that would be appropriate for discussing classical music ("a quartet of musicians"). As the dog simile suggests, "the wrong kind of people" are those lacking the right kind of pedigree, the right kind of origins and background. Given what we know by now about the narrator's mindset, it is not entirely surprising that this category includes those who are not white:

And the wrong kind of people are never in the Salazar.

One card shows Louis Armstrong sitting in monochrome, wearing Jazz Age evening dress and a white fez. Satchmo's face is fixed, not in the customary Thomas-avuncular grin, but something like a grimace. Terror was something that men of his shade learned to express. It was a kind of deference, apology. Slyly acquired self-confidence should always be avoided, lest the weak be confused and everyone else offended. No matter how great his talents, Mr Armstrong should not relax. (31)

Not being white is something that needs to be apologised for. Those of Armstrong's skin colour were (and still are) weak, should not be confident, should live not only in perpetual deference but also in perpetual terror. The narrator vaunts his sense of superiority by using Latinate diction, saying "Thomas-avuncular grin" instead of "Uncle Tom grin". As he becomes more and more explicit, he seems to expect his silent addressee (who, however, is not to be confused with the reader) to go along with what he has to say. Just when we might think things cannot get much worse, they do:

Your sense of humour can feel at home here. And drinkers can sit . . . and look at the postcard of Pops Armstrong in his laughable tuxedo, laughable fez – and wearing his Star of David pendant – there's so much to laugh about, really. And one can feel optimistic on Armstrong's behalf. He was, after all, not murdered as an example to discourage others. He lived a natural life. His grimace was convincing and now that he's dead, he must be completely contented. There's nowhere like the Salazar for letting you feel that humanity's well arranged. (32)

In other words: humanity is well arranged in a hierarchy, with those who are not white being the lowest of the low. They ought to be grateful for not being murdered, especially if they have become conspicuous for their talents and achievements. To the narrator, the notion of a man who is not white wearing formal evening wear is ridiculous. Likewise, non-European headgear or a Jewish religious symbol are dismissed as comical.

There is a place for foreigners in this restaurant, or rather: for a certain type of foreigner, the French or otherwise European chefs, waiters, waitresses preparing and serving French dishes appealing to British palates. “The Salazar’s staff are of many nations, staff always should be. They work long hours and thrive on it, endlessly smiling. You will see them and realise they are the way that strangers always should be” (32). Their purpose is to be useful in a subservient position, as uncomplaining staff working long hours. This, and only this, is what they are good for – unless, of course, they happen to be someone like the Ceauşescus.

The narrator proceeds to sing the praises of the Salazar as a place that cancels out the outside world, keeping out people who do not fit in, and also keeping out any acknowledgement of current affairs that might make the customers of this place uncomfortable. It provides a comfortable cocoon shielding those inside from all that might be disturbing both in the wider world and closer to home:

Peaches and cream and cornflowers: sitting inside the Salazar it’s plain that nothing else has strength, or value. The Salazar can accommodate anybody, but not everyone. Some people fit in more easily and comfortably in other atmospheres. That’s only common sense and nature’s way. Periods of temporary turmoil can feel perplexing, but inside the Salazar they don’t exist and habitués can be calm in any crisis. There is a place for everyone and everyone is happier in their true place. Though the world burns, this remains. (32-33)

The word “inside” is used twice in this paragraph, and indeed the distinction between inside and out (and therefore the perceived necessity to keep certain people out) is fundamental to the nature and purpose of this place. The basis for keeping people out is the archetypal conservative idea that everybody is happier in their “true place”, and that processes of exclusion are not arbitrary but a good thing based on common sense. Here we may remember that common sense has been mentioned before by the narrator, who identified it as something quintessentially British (28). Now he goes one step further, associating common sense (and therefore Britishness) with nature’s way.

It turns out that the Salazar is all about living in denial, about disregarding the unpalatable realities and challenges of the outside world. This is embraced as an entirely British and therefore self-evidently right and legitimate form of splendid isolation of the mind, aided and abetted by the splendid physical isolation provided by the luxurious and deeply reassuring interior of the Salazar. A number of

paragraphs explore the topic of putting up fabricated façades, of trying to mould reality to what one wants it to be rather than what it is. We are introduced to some regulars, and what they have in common is that their lives are based on heavily adjusted versions of reality or even outright lies. There are, for instance, two ladies whose faces have been turned into masks by means of cosmetic surgery:

You might take them for sisters, although they are not related. Look with intelligence and you will notice the semi-identical startled eyes, the whittled-thin noses, the arresting conformation of their lips. They don't share a mother, they share a surgeon. Their faces were both expensive on the date of purchase and if they are currently passé no one at the Salazar will say so. (33)

It is not just faces but also reality as a whole that gets a facelift here. This is what the Salazar is all about, and part of its attraction is that such façades, fictions and fabrications will be tacitly ignored, even though they may have been recognised for what they are. One can be sure that there will be no inconvenient moment of embarrassment, that façades will be upheld, and, likewise, lies will go unchallenged. After the two ladies, the narrator introduces a character calling himself Little Rhody, who drinks Manhattans and pretends to be from Rhode Island. "Helena Brill, who loves dogs, or Ruaridh Cecil, or maybe old Knox, could tell you that Little Rhody is from Esher. This doesn't matter. Little Rhody is the right kind of liar, so his lies will always be benevolent" (34). Benevolent lies are fine, and should the liar get a bit out of line, this can be corrected by a spot of violence, which is as acceptable as the lying: "Little Rhody used to mess his wife around and tell her lies, but then her brother did something bad to him, is the story. They say that he can't have sex any more – only Manhattans. It's a wonderful story, the sort to make you feel your life is pure" (24).

The Salazar is home not only to this liar, but also to a shady investor:

There are lots of stories. The Salazar hums and jingles with them. If you're lucky Hugo Mont will catch you – he does business in a booth most weekdays. He has a fund that gives you ten per cent. People beg him to take their money and he turns them down flat, because he doesn't need them. That's his story – that he knows how to get ten per cent. He will also recite tales from Chile: the one about the young, inexperienced student suddenly running a nation's finances, or about the Economic Miracle, or the bold general and his bolder men who defeated the forces of darkness with just strength. He will tell you that the rumours of torture were untrue, although if you're soft on criminals you get chaos. Chaos is a midnight, sharky ocean that will wash away your ten per cent. Hugo is unbearably endearing when he gets that sentimental look. (34-35)

Hugh Mont's business model is based on a fiction, a tale told by himself, presenting himself as someone who can generate substantial profits no matter what. He obviously has a liking for military dictatorships. His business model appears to work best in countries run by an authoritarian government. Once again, torture is mentioned, and it is given a barely veiled approval. The military dictatorship

might not have tortured people, but torture may be necessary in order to uphold and safeguard an economic system that makes the shady businessman's profits feasible. And as before, something sinister suddenly breaks through a veneer of harmlessness and charm. These sentiments are, after all, expressed by a lovely person, or so the narrator says. As the narrator appears to become more enthusiastic and therefore also more explicit, the reader may experience an increasing sense of unease – that is, unless he or she happens to share his sentiments. This irritation may become more intense while reading the following paragraph:

The Salazar will offer you characters and help you become one. Characters are so much more reliable than friends. And they will tell you the finest stories, all of them true, all of them with a home-grown taste, eternal values familiar to our nation and an uplifting effect. (35)

We have just learned about such stories, which were all about fake faces, lies, mutilation, torture and such like. This is what is here described as “eternal values familiar to our nation” and as “uplifting”.

Towards the end of A.L. Kennedy's “Everybody's Pleased to See You”, we encounter an unexpected twist in the text. The narrator points out that one needs to be inside the Salazar to hear the right stories and that, outside of it, one may encounter very different ones – stories that would be unpleasant and disturbing, which is why they have to be kept out of the cocoon that is the Salazar.

If you're not in the Salazar you won't hear the right stories. Someone, anyone, might tell you any story, even about a dirty little garage near the corner of a nowhere street that burned out on a Saturday night two years ago. Its two neighbours – a dirty little newsagent and a bookmakers – went with it. (35)

Just when our attention might be about to flag a bit, being fatigued by an overdose of the narrator's increasingly disturbing and increasingly predictable rhetoric, he comes up with a story differing a great deal from the ones he has been serving up so far. And this is how he goes on, suddenly adopting the register of the estate agent:

This provided an opportunity to reclaim the whole block, strip out the old apartments and remodel them into exclusive residential opportunities. At street level an old-school ironmonger's opened with a window full of brass, and a tailor's shop for upscale alterations and between them a brand-new restaurant designed to have been there forever. (35)

This is the moment when things begin to fall into place. It turns out that the entire place is the opposite of what it appears to be:

Hard-hat men with nasty accents and machinery behind plywood fences – that would be too unglamorous an idea and so there's no need to have it. The Salazar's seafaring bar top, the sonorous clock that had hung above the kitchen doors since Mahon relieved the

siege at Mafeking, the soup spoons, the Founder's portrait, all those postcards – they were delivered in vans over a weekend. (35)

The reality behind the Salazar is that, far from being a survival from the past, it really is a very recent fiction, a fabrication of such a place. It consists of a pastiche of props assembled to achieve the desired effect. The remarkable thing is that the narrator is not at all troubled by any of this. For him, *this* reality is just a set of unpleasant, unglamorous ideas, and he maintains that there is simply no need to have such ideas. If the lie appears to be more useful than the truth, it is perfectly acceptable to prefer the lie, to stick with it no matter what:

But the Salazar combines so many things we hold so dear that it must always have been here. It's important that once you believe a thing is true you keep on believing. One mustn't be subject to change, only weak people alter, people who want to feel uncomfortable.

We can all have the Salazar and have it forever, any one of us, anyone who is a Salazar kind of person. It takes strength, but strength is rewarded among those who do it justice, those it fits. It takes courage and faith, but inside the Salazar we can feel brave and be faithful to all the good things in life and keep out the strangeness. (Kennedy 35-36)

There is no need to be apologetic about a set of lies if it appears to serve a deeply felt need, the need to "keep out the strangeness". This desire to "keep out the strangeness" was one of the key sentiments that were used to promote Brexit. As we progress through A.L. Kennedy's short story, it becomes more and more obvious that the Salazar as a whole can be read as an allegory of Brexit. It is an embodiment of the notion that Britain can be turned into a cocoon keeping everything unpleasant out. This includes any type of change associated with the modern world because this sort of thing is regarded as change for the worse. It also includes unwelcome people, unwelcome ideas, and unwelcome realities of any sort. The Salazar (just like Brexit) is founded on an elaborate fiction that has a lot to offer to those susceptible to such offers: it promises a chance to return to a glorious past, a time when Britain enjoyed its God-given privilege of ruling the waves and much else besides. It also promises a chance to re-instate what is regarded as a natural hierarchy, restoring white British people to the top of this order of precedence. It appeals to those seeking comfort in very firm distinctions between us and them, between those who have an innate right of being in and those who may and must be kept out.

All of this comes with a veneer of rationality. The way the Salazar operates is said to be based on that wonderful British trait, common sense, which, according to the narrator, is only natural. Thus a trinity of powerfully suggestive ideas – Britishness, common sense, nature – is assembled, insinuating that to reclaim one's Britishness is to reclaim one's common sense, which at the same time amounts to returning to a natural order and a natural way of doing things.

On top of this, there is yet another, equally thin veneer of what might at first glance be taken for Europhile and even cosmopolitan sophistication and open-mindedness. The fact that the Salazar is a *French* restaurant appears to be a nod in this direction. The narrator revels in his connoisseurship of French cuisine, casually referring to Marie-Antoine Carême, a great French chef of the early nineteenth century. More name-dropping suggests that his connoisseurship extends to continental culture as well, as he mentions the twentieth-century French actor and mime artist Jean-Louis Barrault (31). He makes liberal use of French words, knowing perfectly well where to put an *accent aigu*, an *accent circonflexe* or a *cédille*. His culinary erudition also appears to cover North America. He mentions – once again in an almost provocatively casual manner – “Ensslin”, i.e. Hugo Richard Ensslin, a German-American bartender who created cocktails in the early twentieth century.

However, this ostensible cosmopolitanism has its limits. For the narrator, the wider world primarily exists to provide luxuries in the shape of food and drink. If something can be turned into a luxury, if it can be commodified and consumed, it will be appreciated. The narrator admires French cuisine but despises the French and others “from many nations”. Their purpose in his greater scheme of things is to provide underpaid staff working long hours. Therefore, he expects subordination and deference from foreigners, or, as he prefers to say, “strangers” (32), emphasising an unbridgeable gulf of social distance.

The narrator’s voice emerges as a peculiar voice of British chauvinism while he does his best to recruit a new chauvinist, someone he wants to become “a new patron” of the Salazar (28). As he becomes more and more enthusiastic, presenting his world view in an increasingly unguarded way, the reader – unless she or he happens to be of the same persuasion – will come to realise how Kennedy’s short story has an implicit bearing on recent and even current events, how it can be read as an allegory of Brexit and the immediate post-Brexit era.

The Salazar is a place embodying a mindset. The narrator praises the liberating effect it has on its patrons, welcoming them as “the Salazar kind of person” and at the same time turning them into that kind of person. It becomes increasingly obvious how this place brings out the worst in its patrons: thoughtlessness, brutality, authoritarian phantasies of elevation, entitlement and omnipotence, admiration for dictators, imperial nostalgia, male chauvinism, xenophobia, and violent racism laced with a dash of antisemitism.

Perhaps the most sinister thing about the Salazar is the reason why it has been brought into being. It does not exist to comfort those who have a desire to retire into a make-believe world of British and imperial nostalgia, a dream of national destiny. Its true purpose is both to stimulate and at the same time to commodify this desire. It is all about making money, about bringing in paying customers,

selling them an experience that is not available in the real world and pretending that this experience *is* the real world, the world as it should be. The values it purports to serve are merely a means to an end. In this respect, the parallels to Brexit are once more conspicuous, as the Prime Minister who prided himself on getting Brexit done notoriously followed his own primary agenda of self-advancement.

Another manifest connection between Kennedy's tale about the Salazar with recent developments in politics can be found in the narrator's attitude to falsehood and truth. Far from concealing how this restaurant actually came into being, he brazenly recounts the story, situating it in a multiplicity of stories out of which one may pick at will the one that is most useful. He feels free to openly promote what we have come to know as "alternative facts", a memorably ignominious phrase coined by one of President Trump's aides right after his inauguration in 2017 ("Kellyanne Conway" n.p.). This disregard for the truth is eerily reminiscent of the post-factual politics embraced by populist conservative leaders both in Britain and the United States within recent memory. In connection with Brexit, one may think of the notorious red buses bearing slogans and messages taking considerable liberties with the truth: "We send the EU **£350 million** a week [/] let's fund our NHS instead [.] Vote Leave. [/] Let's take back control [.]" (Asthana n.p.). One may perhaps also think about other liberties taken with the truth by the Prime Minister who got Brexit done, including those that have come to light after the publication of this short story.

A.L. Kennedy's criticism of Brexit and the kind of post-factual thinking espoused by the sort of populist conservatism that helped to bring it about is both subtle and hard-hitting. "Everybody's Pleased to See You" is a text helping to break what has been described as the "utter cultural silence with which Brexit has been met in the Scottish literary scene" (Introna 1). It is a measure of Kennedy's consummate skill how she manages to comment on Brexit without ever mentioning the word.

This is how, in the last paragraph of her story, the narrator created by Kennedy sums up what the Salazar has to offer: "So come to the Salazar. You have to come, you have to be here. Unless you come, you won't understand. You won't see it's perfect for you, it's what you deserve" (Kennedy 36). These sentences are almost the same as those found at the beginning of the story, but now they have lost their enigmatic character. The patrons of the Salazar are taken for a ride, and as they are willing to be deceived, the deception offered by the Salazar is precisely what they deserve. The same goes for Brexit.

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