

Liar!

A Modern Fairytale

By

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Any resemblance to anyone anywhere, etc, etc, etc...

Saturday, Prime Time.

Buck Mulligan is on fire. He doesn't know it yet, but he is starting to suspect something is wrong because the studio audience, who only moments ago were simultaneously applauding and booing him onto the stage, have at last come together in a collective, wide-eyed intake of breath. A burning match has just landed in his famous bouffant, and the hairspray that for the past twenty years has held it aloft like nylon candyfloss has combusted to create a phosphorescent Roman candle. He can already smell it. In a few seconds, his hair will be no more, and his scalp will start to fry.

The image of a middle-aged TV personality in an ill-fitting suit, with a four-foot-tall flame rising from his head, his face frozen in horror, will become iconic. It will adorn posters, mugs, memes and tee shirts. It will even appear on the cover of a multi-million-selling hip-hop album, years after most people have forgotten his name. It will be routinely accompanied by a single graffitied word. "Liar!" It will also mark the end of his career. Six seconds from now, the Free TV network will pull the plug on him for good, but not before a nation (or at least, the seven million of them who tuned in) have agreed that, "Well... He had it coming."

The match came from the wings, stage left. It was thrown by a twenty-four-year-old animal trainer called Billy Belladietro. Billy has several reasons for wanting to set fire to Buck. The first is that Billy has been publicly shamed. He was, until recently, known to the public only as the trainer of Dante the Wonder Dog, and he is angry that he has now become more famous for having felled the ageing TV star in the back of a limousine. The limousine, most horrifyingly of all as far as the British public is concerned, also contained Dante himself. The paparazzied photograph of Buck Milligan, Billy and the indifferently

staring cockapoo will not be as famous as the one of the man with his hair on fire, but it is currently the second most viewed image on the internet.

Billy is also annoyed because Mulligan, only two days ago, appeared on Coffee Time with Lawrence and Lucy and all but called him a whore. Buck (Whose real name is David) paid him nine hundred pounds for the sex act in question, but that, Billy thinks, is beside the point. Thirdly, although Billy is already losing count, he has set fire to Buck Mulligan's hair "because of all of that Nazi shit on YouTube."

For the last day and a half, the airwaves and fibreoptic cables of the world have been alive with a thirteen-minute video of a youngish Buck Mulligan performing in front of a small audience in a dingey windowless room. It appears to be a toilet. In the video, he is Nazi saluting and shouting racist, sexist, antisemitic and homophobic slogans while the audience, whose faces are not visible, laugh like amphetamine-fuelled chimpanzees.

The video only came to light on Friday morning, the day after Mulligan's disastrous appearance on Coffee Time. Things already looked bad for him after the Lawrence and Lucy interview but the execs at ITV had decided to stick with him. Until they saw "that video". It landed during the night and greeted them and the public with their cornflakes and on their commute to work. By Friday night Buck Mulligan's career was hanging by a thread, but when ITV cancelled, Free TV stepped in. Their motivations were not wholly unselfish, of course. Mulligan's insane routine was the most watched video on the internet, and they wanted a piece of the action. The channel had been doing OK in the day time, with edgy discussion shows and the *Free News* strand, but their audiences were mostly counted in the hundreds of thousands. Tonight, they have millions. Because Free TV believes in free speech and that everyone deserves a #SecondChance, don't they?

Last of all, Billy Belladietro threw the match because he was curious. Curious to see what would happen if he flicked a burning object into a hairdo that was more lacquer than

hair. A hairdo which, for the past twenty years, has been growing gradually thinner on the head of one of Britain's most popular, most divisive and most profitable TV stars. Well, now he knows.

As the flame starts to roar and to throw a shower of glittering sparks into the air, Buck Mulligan is thinking that his appearance on Coffee Time was, with hindsight, a mistake. He had been hiding behind his pseudonym and under his celebrated coiffure for nearly twenty years but decided to reveal his true personality for the first time on daytime TV. It could not have gone any worse. Having grown used to the edgy (for prime time) Buck with his too-tight suit, his hairdo, and his permatan, the public, as it turned out, were wholly unprepared for the man behind the disguise.

Thursday, Coffee Time (58 hours and 36 minutes before the end)

Lawrence and Lucy are wrapping up an item about a woman who keeps chickens in her twelfth-floor council flat, with a discussion about whether or not chickens can fly. Lucy insists that they can't but Lawrence says that he's seen one in a tree and that it must have got there somehow. They agree, affectionally and flirtatiously, to differ. Then Lawrence turns to camera, and his face grows more serious. "Now, I'm sure you've all seen it in the news and on social media in the last week or so, some images of one of Britain's best-loved but sometimes controversial entertainers in a rather compromising situation." Lawrence uses the voice he always uses for segments that are likely to shock and excite the viewers.

"Yes, Lawrence. I think we've all seen them," says Lucy, also using her concerned voice and raising a perfectly plucked eyebrow towards the as-yet-unseen guest.

"Well, we've got the subject of those pictures in the studio with us today, but not as you've seen him before. Because it's not Buck Mulligan sitting opposite me; instead, it's the man behind the mandarin tan, David Mulligan. Good Morning, David."

Cut to David: Sitting opposite the immaculate Lawrence and Lucy on the famous pastel pink sofa is the barely recognisable figure of David Mulligan. His hair is without fixatives and hanging in limp, thin strands around his face. He is not wearing make-up. This interview is to be warts and all, and David has taken it far too literally. Gone too is the famous suit. He is wearing instead a baggy green sweater and faded jeans. He is pale and tired. On his face is a look of concerned sincerity that echoes the expressions of his hosts. He nods a hello but does not speak. He is ready for some difficult questions, and it is already apparent that he is truly, truly sorry.

"It's very brave of you to come on this morning, David," says Lucy. "Your wife must be very distressed by what's happened."

"Yes, Lucy." When David speaks, it is with the voice of his famous alter ego, which is not a little confusing for everyone. "My wife is going through a terrible time right now and that's something I am truly sorry for."

Twitter is already buzzing:

What's wrong with his face? #weirdo #liar #WTF?

Blow-job scumbag. How could he do that in front of little Dante? I love @wonderdog! #liar #cockapoo

Why is everyone so surprised that @Buckmulligann is a #liar. It was always going to end here. #pervert

But it will not end here; no one has seen the video yet, as if this isn't bad enough.

"So, is that something you want to say to your wife?" asks Lawrence.

"Yes. Yes, it is. I have already said it, but I just want her to know that I am sorry."

"Well, why don't you say it now?" Lawrence gestures to the camera and through it to David's wife and the watching public. David Mulligan turns to face them all.

"I am so sorry. My darling Maggy... Mags, there is no excuse for what I've done. I paid a man for sex because I was confused, and for that, I am truly, truly sorry. And I want to say that to everyone. All the people who have allowed me into their living rooms for the past twenty years, the people who've made me what I am. I have let you all down."

He looks like he's going to cry. I believe him? Give him a #SecondChance

@Buckmulligann #liar #cockapoo #pervert probably fucked @wonderdog too

Don't any of you fucking idiots get irony? @Buckmulligann is a character. If you don't get that then you're the joke!!!! #SecondChance

I was confused last week and I ended up having sex with an Alsatian in the back of a taxi. It can happen to anyone. @Buckmulligann is a joke. #ILoveDogs

Buck Mulligan fucks dogs! #SecondChance

The interview goes on for what feels to David like an hour but is, in fact only eleven minutes and thirty-nine seconds. David is coming out of his two-decade-long stay in the closet. He tells Lawrence and Lucy that he has been living a lie but that, at last, a terrible weight is being lifted from his shoulders. He seems to be holding back the tears. He says that his wife has always known, and has always been, "very supportive." Lawrence and Lucy ask more probing questions. Lucy plays good cop but a good cop with old-fashioned morals, and Lawrence plays bad cop, albeit one with a twinkle in his eye because, hey, we've all done it at some time in our lives, haven't we? Not that, of course... although oddly, Lawrence did do something very similar only last night. In Lawrence's case though, the price was much lower and there was no dog and no paparazzo.

"You've always courted controversy though, haven't you, David? Buck Mulligan is quite a challenging character. What happened in the back of that limousine was the kind of thing Buck would do, and he's also a racist and a sexist..."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, Lawrence." David Mulligan must, even now, protect the golden goose that supplies his bread and butter. "Buck is just an old-fashioned guy. He's not a racist; he's just confused by the modern world."

"You're confused, Buck is confused. There seem to be quite a lot of confused people around at the moment, and you're at least two of them." David smiles feebly. He is sweating badly now. "Who is the real David Mulligan? Are you more like Buck than you care to admit, perhaps?"

Fucking perverted Nazi!!!! I hope he gets cancer and dies (-:

Once upon a time it was clear to everyone (or at least David thought it was) that the character of Buck Mulligan was just a parody of a seventies TV host. A man who had made his living telling racist and sexist jokes in working men's clubs and on TV, only to find himself confronted with the values of the modern world. Buck's clumsy attempts at political correctness were, indeed, the joke. Beneath the coiffured facade is a confused, middle-aged, working-class man desperately trying to understand the new world order. But then came the alt-right. In recent years, Buck has become a hero for angry boys in their bedrooms who don't do irony. For them, Buck's ham-fisted attempts to say the right thing to women, black people, disabled people, short, brown, gay and transgender people highlight the absurdity of modern life. How can anyone navigate a world filled with libtard snowflakes when all you really want to do is shout the N-word and do a funny chinaman voice?

"Oh no, Lawrence." The close-up of David Mulligan's face makes him look ill. A bead of sweat is hanging from the end of his nose. "I'm nothing like Buck, but I grew up in a world where all the things Buck wants to say were commonplace. No one thought about it back then, but I still think Buck means well. It's just that he's got years' worth of material that he can't use any more, and he genuinely doesn't know why it's offensive. I know why it's

offensive. So that's the difference." But no one is listening now. All anyone can see is a bead of sweat and a pale, lank-haired, middle-aged man defending the indefensible.

David Mulligan's wife is also watching from her kid leather sofa in the cream, shagpile lounge of their seven-bedroomed detached in the leafy sub-suburbs of Surrey. He didn't tell her he was going to do this. She has turned on the TV because her publicist, Sammy "The Spin" Edwards, has alerted her to the PR debacle, in which her name has now been used seven times. Sammy is still at the other end of the phone line as Maggy Mulligan watches her husband dig himself deeper and deeper into unprofitability. She picks up the phone from the onyx coffee table and holds it to her mouth. "OK, Sammy, I'm all yours. Let's bury this motherfucker!"

That Limousine. (Just under two weeks before the end)

Dante, the Wonder Dog, is still wearing a silver lamé cape and flying helmet, having just come off stage at the semi-finals of *The Glory Hole*. He seems unconcerned at having been knocked out of the competition. Billy Belladietro, meanwhile, is incandescent. "I can't believe you didn't put me through!" He is shrieking into the face of Buck Mulligan, who is also still in full costume and stage make-up. "You voted for that fucking juggler. A Juggler!"

"The public make the final decision Billy and she was juggling kittens. People love kittens."

"I can't believe that's even allowed. And people loved Dante the Wonder Dog until two hours ago." Dante belches loudly. His breath smells of sardines. "I can't believe I let you talk me into having sex with you, and then you just vote me off."

"But that wasn't about the show. I love you, Billy." Buck slides along the seat towards the object of his affections as Dante lets off a long, high-pitched fart. "Jesus, what are you feeding that fucking cunt?"

"Oh, so now you're going to take it out on the dog, are you?"

"I can't fucking breathe!" Buck opens the blacked-out window of the limousine a few inches and gasps theatrically for air.

"Do you honestly think I had sex with you for any other reason than because you were one of the judges?"

"But I thought..."

"Well, you were confused."

"I want you, Billy."

"Well, what about what I want? My career is over before it's even started. I have rent to pay, you know?" Dante lets out another fart. It smells like bad eggs and half-digested tripe.

"Christ!" Buck is choking as he takes his wallet out of his pocket. "I have plenty of money, Billy. You never have to worry about money." He produces a disorganised handful of notes. "There's nine hundred pounds there. That will cover your rent, won't it?"

Billy had been on the verge of storming out, but the sight of so much money has changed his mind. "Oh, and what do I have to do for that?" he says scornfully.

"You don't have to do anything. I just want you to have it."

"My rent is twice that."

"We'll go to a cashpoint... But I just want us to be nice to each other." Buck glances involuntarily towards his crotch as he says this, but Billy gets the message.

"Two grand."

"I just want us to be..." says Buck, but Billy is already kneeling on the floor of the car and unzipping his fly. Dante lets off another fart.

Buck leans back in his seat and opens the window a few more inches to let in the cold night air. The smell of the bins is almost refreshing after the dog farts. The limo is parked in

an alley behind the Oakwood TV Theatre, and the driver is waiting discreetly in a bar across the road. They are alone, except, of course, for the rats.

Out of the darkness, a face appears at the open window. It is the face of freelance photographer and all-round sociopath Jonny "the lens lizard" Johnson, who, before Buck can move his finger to close the window, has raised a camera to his leering eye and, FLASH!

A Marriage. (A morning at the beginning of the end)

"I married a fucking queer. I don't believe it." Maggy Mulligan is only feigning surprise. She has always known about her husband's flexible sexuality. "You were all over that bloody waiter last night."

"It doesn't mean I don't love you Mags." David has brought up Maggy's breakfast on a tray. A boiled egg and a pot of fresh coffee. "I've made soldiers."

"I'm sure you have." says his wife as she sits up in her queen-sized bed. "I should bloody well leave you."

"Don't say that, Mags. We're a good team, you and me."

"I'm just your fucking beard, David."

"I wouldn't mind if you... I mean, you were flirting with the waiter too."

"This whole thing is a lie, David. You and me and Buck bloody Mulligan. It's all a lie."

"But it works, Mags. Look." David waves a hand at the opulent bedroom, with its shahtoosh curtains and its view of the wide Surry hills. "Buck pays for all of this. He's been good to us. He's been good to you. And yes, it is a lie, but if the world found out he was gay... Buck Mulligan can't be gay."

"So you're blackmailing me, is that it? I have to stay with you and keep on pretending that we have a normal marriage, or we'll lose everything?"

"But you always knew about me, Mags."

"How do you think it makes me feel, David? I thought you might give it up once we were married."

"Convert?"

"No, David. Be faithful!"

"I am faithful, but sometimes I need..."

"Well, I need a fucking Ferrari. One of those cute convertible ones and a house in France, so I can get away from you now and then."

"Well, I don't know if we can afford... Unless I take the ITV job, but I'd be going full-on mainstream, Saturday night."

"Then you'd better take it. If you still think you have a drop of integrity left, then you're even more stupid than you look."

David sits on the edge of the bed and tries to feel his wife's knee through the mauve silk duvet. "Remember how it used to be, Mags. It used to be fun." His wife picks up her spoon and cracks open her soft-boiled egg.

"Fuck off, David."

A Toilet... (at the end of the world)

David Mulligan has just come off stage, or what passes for one at Jimjams Comedy Club. The audience watched his act in largely embarrassed silence, though one or two faked a little laughter out of politeness. They came out on a wet Tuesday night to see the headline act, Vicky Sponge, because she's been on telly, and although none of them were openly hostile, it was plain that they would rather the support act just fuck off and stop wasting their time. After ten minutes of excruciating indifference, one of them had a coughing fit. David waited for her to finish, having prepared what he hoped was a funny line, only to be beaten to it by

another member of the audience. As the coughing subsided, David left too long a pause, and a wag from the back of the room got in first with, "There used to be a pool table in here."

After that, he condensed his second ten minutes down to two and got off the stage.

"What the fuck?!" Vicky Sponge is furious. "You're supposed to do twenty minutes. I haven't even got my makeup on."

"Sorry, Vicky. I was dying out there."

"So fucking what? Get your cock out! Do a fucking dance but stay the fuck on until I'm ready."

"I'm sorry, Vicky, I just...." But Vicky Sponge is already heading out of the dressing room, which used to be the men's toilets back when there were indeed pool tables in this part of Stevenage Leisure Centre. David looks at his shoes as the sound of applause drifts through the galvanised steel air vents, followed by the familiar voice of TV comic Vicky Sponge.

"David Mulligan, everyone... What a cunt!"

David is thinking about giving up the business once and for all. It's been more than a decade now of back rooms, open mics and Edinburgh fringes and he's still not making a living. Many more nights like tonight, and he might just do something stupid. "At least I'll have one thing in common with Tony Hancock," he says to himself as the familiar rhythms of Vicky Sponge's act rise and fall like waves through the air vents. Each long setup, rising absurdity and crude punch line is followed by warm cascades of laughter. "Fucking bitch." The door of the toilet opens slightly, and David's friend (and once upon a time school girlfriend) Maggy Philips peeps into the room.

"You OK, sweetie?" She is holding a camcorder.

"You weren't taping that, were you?"

"It's OK, I'll tape over it."

"It's not always like that, you know."

"Oh well, a prophet never gets a laugh in his home town or something like that. They know you're a local boy and there's nothing people from Stevenage hate so much as people from Stevenage. It just reminds them that they're... well, you know... from Stevenage." David allows himself a smile.

"Oh, I don't know Mags. I just feel like time is running out."

"Jesus. You feel like time is running out? I'm thirty-four, unemployed, single, and I live in fucking Stevenage."

"We could get married if you like. I need looking after."

"You know David, if it wasn't for you being gay... I mean, we used to have fun, didn't we? You and me?"

"I haven't had sex in three years, so I'm not sure I count as gay any more. I've probably expired..." David and Maggy are looking into each other's eyes. It is the first time in years that either of them has made lingering eye contact with anyone, but the moment is broken by the arrival of three more people. They are David's old school friends, Moe, Shempy and Curly Joe. They, like Maggy, have not seen David in some years.

"Fucking hell, mate," says Moe, "that was fucking awful."

"Thanks, mate," says David.

"Stevenage people," says Curly, "total cunts, on the whole. Should have got your cock out. They like that kind of thing."

"Yeah, thanks for the advice."

"Should have given them ten minutes of Buck Mulligan," offers Shempy, "they wouldn't have known what hit 'em. Yeah, good old Buck, you should bring him back."

Shempy is referring to a character that David used to perform at school in the nineteen eighties. Back then, he was the funniest kid in the bike sheds. He had a different character for every day of the week. Among everyone's favourites were the angry cockney, the man with

no lips, the cross-dressing headmaster and, of course, Buck. Everyone had an uncle or a dad who was a bit like Buck Mulligan, or they saw comedians on the TV who were even worse. Also, and for reasons no one could fathom when David did Buck, he borrowed hairspray from the girls and made his hair into an enormous puff. Buck Mulligan told every joke you just shouldn't tell.

David gives them a little of the old act now, but this time with a twist. It's not the nineteen eighties any more; it's 2003, and Buck's act is so far out that it's become ridiculous, Dadaist and possibly even illegal. He does Freddie Star's Hitler walk and Nazi salute, Jim Davison's Chalky White, some of Bernard Manning's Pakistani jokes and all the old material that he heard growing up in the seventies, from his family, in the street and on the TV. He goes for the blacks, the queers, the mothers-in-law, the chinks, the yids and the micks. David is two of those things, at least but there are no holds barred now. Buck Mulligan is back. He was close to the bone in the eighties, but now he seems totally deranged. His victims are drowned in swimming pools, stuck to windows by their lips or hung from ceilings with Velcro. Their children are turned into bats and sent to hell. Some are used as tampons, while others are surrounded by flies or just have the "shit kicked out of them". Gay men are insatiable sexual predators, while the Scots and the Jews are mean-fisted, and the Irish can barely get through the day without misunderstanding everything that is said to them. The Chinese have misshapen genitals and constantly mispronounce vital instructions. Everybody seems to smell bad. Women are figures of hate for no apparent reason other than that they are women, while people with learning disabilities are drooling, shrieking, gyrating and being employed as whisks. Only English-speaking, white men from south of Hadrian's wall are spared, as the nameless and faceless perpetrators of all this carnage. The audience of four doesn't know whether to cringe or to giggle or to call the police, but as Buck goes to greater and greater heights of offence, there is only one way to survive. Laugh!

As Buck winds down again, he takes a can of Vicky Sponge's hairspray from the dressing table and uses it to tease his hair into the familiar giant cloud. "You just can't say any of that stuff anymore because everyone's gone soft," says Buck.

"Thank god for that," says Maggy as the room breathes a sigh of relief.

"But it was just a bit of fun," says Buck.

"Yeah, you have to wonder what's up with people these days. If you can't shout the N-word in someone's face and advocate the violent assault of vulnerable minorities, what can you do?"

"Exactly. Now, have you heard the one about the..."

"Buck... Enough now... The cameras are rolling." Maggy waves the camcorder.

"You know that's not a bad idea," says David, out of character now.

"What? The violent assault of vulnerable minorities?"

"No, that character, Buck. Bring him back for next year's Edinburgh show. Call it *Buck Mulligan in the Twenty-First Century*. He's accidentally stepped into a time vortex in the bogs of the Embassy Club in 1978 and come out on stage in Edinburgh in 2004?"

Maggy raises an eyebrow. "Hmmm... that could work, you know. He wouldn't be able to use any of his material, of course."

"Of course. That would be the joke."

"I could help you work it up into something if you like. I'm not doing anything else right now."

"You weren't filming all of that, were you?" says David.

"Don't worry, who's going to see it? I'm hardly going to go around selling VHS tapes on street corners, am I?"

The Money Shot. (Two seconds to go...)

Buck Mulligan is on fire. A purple flame is protruding from his head as his face contorts into a mask of horrified surprise. Someone in the audience screams the word that will accompany this picture forever.

Freeze frame.

Fade to black.

(The end)