

THE IDES OF MARCH

by Duncan Ley

-SCENE EXCERPT-

ACT ONE - SCENE FIVE.

JONI is lying on the floor, writing in a school journal. OLIVER enters. He has a drink in his hand.

OLIVER Whatchyadoin' kiddo?

JONI Homework.

OLIVER What's it this time? Maths? English?

JONI Social studies. Have to write a five-minute speech then do it in front of the class.

OLIVER What's the topic?

JONI Whaddaya reckon?

OLIVER Oh. What about it?

JONI Is that a drink in your hand?

OLIVER This? Could be.

JONI Is it a real one?

OLIVER *(he sniffs it)* Yep.

JONI I wish you wouldn't.

OLIVER It's only one drink, Joni.

JONI You going away on business soon?

OLIVER Yeah. How did you know?

JONI You drink more when you go away on business.

OLIVER For God's sake Joni, it's only one drink!

JONI No need to raise your voice.

OLIVER Christ, your mother trained you well. *(she looks at him implacably)* Sorry. *(pause)* Anyway, to answer my question Miss, what are you going to talk about?

JONI Mum. Me and mum. You know, what happened.

OLIVER You... you okay with doing that? *(she shrugs)* Do me a favour Joni. Before you read it out at school, show it to me first. Okay?

JONI Okay.

OLIVER I'll be in my study, if you need me. And I'll be going out later.

JONI Work?

OLIVER Yes. Sorry.

JONI You say sorry a lot.

OLIVER Yeah, I do. Sorry.

JONI Dad? Will we have to move again? It's just – well, I like my new school.
That's all.

OLIVER I'll keep that in mind.

SCENE SIX.

Night-time. Warren's house, on the verandah, with the ambient sounds of night. WARREN and AHMED have a drink in their hands.

AHMED *(wistful)* Oh, the Grand Old Duke of York

WARREN *(pause)* He had ten thousand men

AHMED And he marched them up to the top of the hill, and he marched them down again!

WARREN And when they were up they were up!

AHMED And when they were down they were down!

WARREN And when they were only half way up

BOTH They were neither up or down! *(they both drink, pause, then:)*

AHMED Faster!

BOTH *(very fast)* Oh the Grand Old Duke of York, he had ten thousand men, and he marched them up to the top of the hill, and he marched them down again! And when they were up they were up! And when they were down they were down! And when they were only half way up, they were neither up or down! *(and drink)*

WARREN Remind me why we do that?

AHMED Homage to the Navy, my friend.

WARREN We sung that in the Navy?

AHMED Can't remember. Don't think so.

WARREN God, those were the days. Being told what to do, what to wear. *(raising his glass)* To the simple life.

AHMED The simple life. Speaking of which, do you know what I have in my pocket?

WARREN Go on.

AHMED Cigarettes. Real cigarettes.

WARREN Real cigarettes? You mean the ones that give you cancer? Brilliant.

AHMED *(producing the packet and giving it WARREN)* For you, my friend, so you may indulge in the sophisticated evils of life. *(out the packet comes)*

WARREN Thank you, my friend. *(he opens the packet, takes out a cigarette, and treating it as gold, sniffs along it)* Ah, tobacco. There is nothing finer. A man who smokes has no great care whether he lives or dies...

AHMED ...and therefore, is at peace with himself and the world around him.

WARREN Amen, brother. You want one now?

AHMED No, no, they're for you. Treasure them now, I'm not sure when I'll be getting any more.

WARREN I'll have one a week, after the Sunday roast. Ah, I can feel the head-spin now.

AHMED You don't get that with those new SanCigs.

WARREN (*disgusted*) Sanitary Cigarettes. My father would've wept buckets.

AHMED A cigarette that has no detrimental health effect is an affront to democratic society.

WARREN They come in fruit flavours, for fuck's sake! I saw the advert on television. (*mimicking*) 'When you smoke a Silky-Road SanCig, you inhale Passionfruit, exhale Passion.' So how much did you pay for these then?

AHMED You don't want to know. When's this friend of yours arriving?

WARREN 'Round ten.

AHMED God, we'll be under the table by then.

WARREN Here's hoping.

AHMED You read the latest Time magazine?

WARREN Because I have time to read.

AHMED Get this. Apparently in the US, over the last twelve months there's been more reported sightings of Osama Bin Laden than UFO's.

WARREN Yanks for you. Don't they know he's been dead for years?

AHMED Doesn't seem to stop him shopping at Walmart.

WARREN Don't you just love conspiracy theories? The CIA have him in an oxygen tank. He's imprisoned on the International Space Station. He's been cloned by the Saudi Royal Family.

AHMED I have my own theory. No, I'm serious.

WARREN Go on.

AHMED He's alive and well, in a cave somewhere near the Kashmiri border, and he's busy recording a double-comeback-album with Elvis. Oh yes, my friend. When the world hears Blue Suede Sandals for the first time, the house will rock.

WARREN One of these days I'm going to do the world a favour and report you for sedition.

AHMED Against whom? Osama Bin Laden?

WARREN No, Elvis. I respect your prophet. Please respect mine.

AHMED Glad to see you're not sobering up.

WARREN And you – I can never tell with you. You're not meant to drink, you know.

AHMED Listen Christian. When's the last time you gave one tenth of your income to the Church?

WARREN Christmas. Six years ago. I was feeling particularly spiritual that year.

AHMED So was I, remember? I won two thousand dollars on the Melbourne Cup.

WARREN Whatever happened to Allah's prohibition on gambling?

AHMED My learned friend, Allah does not prohibit gambling. On the contrary, he delights in seeing one of his chosen vanquish the infidels armed only with three-of-a-kind.

WARREN A fascinating version of the Qu'ran you have.

AHMED Found in a casino built by Saladin after he'd liberated Jerusalem by thrashing Richard Lionheart in an all-night game of whist.

WARREN Ahmed. You're a true revisionist.

AHMED All history is revisionist. I'm a journalist, I should know.

WARREN And I'm a public servant, so I've no idea what you're talking about. And to mention someone who has no idea what they're talking about, how was your interview with my ex-wife?

AHMED Not too bad.

WARREN Did you record it? You know you have to lodge any recorded interview with the new Media Supervisions Department.

AHMED Yes yes.

WARREN Just reminding you. Don't want you getting into trouble.

AHMED She says 'hello', by the way.

WARREN How civil of the old cow. Anyhow, I'm seeing her on the fifteenth. God, that'll be fun.

OLIVER *(off)* Anybody home?

WARREN Oliver! Come through, we're out here on the veranda.

OLIVER *(enters, carrying a bottle in a brown paper bag)* Sorry I'm a bit early.

WARREN Not at all, glad you could make it! Ahmed, this is the Oliver O'Brien I was telling you about.

AHMED *(shaking hands)* Good to meet you, Oliver.

OLIVER Likewise.

AHMED Warren mentioned you were a serviceman.

OLIVER Yes, Regular Army. I was the Army Liaison Officer on the HMAS Tobruk when Warren-

WARREN -I was one of the bridge officers. God, that was – what, Oliver? – fifteen years ago?

OLIVER Something like that.

WARREN And then would you believe, bang! We run into each other last month, in a hardware store of all places!

AHMED You in a hardware store, Warren? That I find hard to believe. *(OLIVER chuckles)* He built a kennel for his dog once. Designed it himself.

WARREN Here we go.

AHMED No, no, it was beautiful. Pure craftsmanship. Solid as a shithouse. Built to last. Plastic-lined, to keep out the rain. Even had a swinging door with ‘Bella’s Place’ stenciled in gold lettering.

OLIVER Go on, what happened?

AHMED The door only swung one way. Inwards. So dog goes in, dog can’t get out! Took him two hours to get the door off. Dog’s yelping, peeing, shitting herself. He finally gets the door off, dog bolts out, down the driveway. Never seen again!

WARREN I visited every bloody animal shelter in the city.

AHMED No sign of her!

OLIVER That’s brilliant! Hey, I brought over some of the old stuff. That alright with you guys?

AHMED What, this is real scotch?

OLIVER Bourbon.

AHMED Never could tell the difference.

OLIVER Same here.

WARREN I’ll get you a glass.

AHMED Where did you get your whiskey? Difficult to come by these days.

OLIVER Inherited a few cases from my old man.

AHMED Ah, the tyranny of good fortune, Allah be praised.

OLIVER Amen to that.

WARREN So Ollie, what do you do for a crust nowadays?

OLIVER I’m a financial planner. Nothing too interesting.

WARREN Who for?

OLIVER Babyco, would you believe.

AHMED Babyco needs financial planners?

OLIVER It’s a multi-million dollar industry. No surer market than babies.

AHMED So, you got family of your own then?

OLIVER No, still the bachelor I’m afraid. Came close twice, but in the end they didn’t like my cooking. (AHMED *laughs*)

WARREN Well then, welcome to the cathedral of bachelorhood. Cheers. (*all raise their glass*) The Ides of March. Never again.

AHMED & OLIVER Never again.

WARREN So Oliver, the usual question.

OLIVER I was up in Brisbane. There was this Multi-Corp conference — it’s a networking organization for a number of businesses around Australia. Multi-Corp had organized social events during the day, you know, to break up the tedium. We were playing indoor cricket against KPMG Perth - nice bunch of guys. I was getting ready to face the last ball – you bat in pairs for four overs then swap with another pair – don’t know why you needed to know that – so, facing the last ball when this guy from reception comes running in,

skin white as milk, and screaming, literally screaming. Scared the shit out of everyone. No-one could understand what he was saying. And this I'll never forget. There must've been fifty of us in that centre, each with a phone or pager. And suddenly they all started to ring. All of them. Those high-pitched tones, so damn loud, one on top of another, on and on and on. And no-one moved a muscle. We all just stared at one another. It's like – I don't know – like out of nowhere doom appeared and paralyzed the air. *(pause)* Anyway. You guys?

WARREN I was sick that day, rugged up on the couch, watching television, some kid's show. Children's television's still a comfort when you're sick. And I remember this – funny what sticks with you – I had a spoonful of soup up to my mouth. This big orange puppet was counting to twelve. It got to the number nine - the program just changed. No warning. A newsroom. ABC, SBS, BBC. Don't remember. Chaos. Live footage. First explosion had already happened, the non-nuclear one. To get our attention. Most of Flinders Station, gone. People all over the place, dying, wounded. Emergency services, media, everywhere. Then the big one. Everything went. Gone in a second. At the time the video feed was from that helicopter -you know, the famous six-second footage, before the electromagnetic pulse got to it. Then nothing. Nothing for a long time. What got to me – what still gets to me – there I was, lying on a couch, eating soup, watching over three hundred thousand people die in the time it would've taken me to pick up the remote and change the channel. *(pause)* Fuck, I need another drink after that. *(AHMED pours them all another drink)* Stupid bloody name, they gave it. The Ides of March. Christ. That's commercial media for you. *(pause)* It's important, isn't it? To remember. To commemorate. Helps us to heal, to strengthen. Focuses our intent.

OLIVER Never again.

AHMED Never again.

WARREN Hell, they couldn't do it again. Not like that anyway. We're better. More vigilant.

OLIVER I don't know. Might only take one or two. Still haven't caught them all, from what I've read.

WARREN Well, not all, but most. The foreign cell -

OLIVER - the one in Pakistan?

WARREN Yeah. All in custody, the US has had them for months. Most of the domestic cell are down too. We'll pick up the rest soon, no doubt. Not my department, I mean NISA.

OLIVER Don't know much about them.

AHMED Who does?

WARREN With good reason. If we don't know what they're up to, then there's little chance those they're after will.

OLIVER Heard the stories about these secret prisons they've got hidden away in the outback?

AHMED Who, NISA?

OLIVER Yeah. Re-education centres, interrogation sites, something like that.

WARREN I've heard that sort of thing as well. Probably true. Hell I don't mind. Thank God for NISA, I say. Let 'em go get the bastards.

AHMED Well sure, but what about the other rumours?

OLIVER Which one?

AHMED You know, about them executing political prisoners?

OLIVER You're pretty high up there in the public service, Warren. You ever heard of such a thing?

WARREN No, nothing, and I'm fairly certain it's just urban myth, guys.

AHMED Lots of them around nowadays.

OLIVER Understandable when there's no transparency.

WARREN Well, that's the world we live in nowadays, I'm afraid. And look, even if we did, y'know, look the other way whilst some treasonous bugger got a rope round their neck, we wouldn't be the only country doing it. Wouldn't even be the only western country doing it. In fact, we'd probably be falling into line with the majority of them. Another drink?

OLIVER Cheers. So Ahmed - and apologies if this is out of line, I'm just interested - it must be hard for - well, I don't really know how to say this -

AHMED No, it's okay, no-one really does. You mean the Muslim community?

OLIVER Well, yes. And for you personally, of course.

AHMED Well, let me-

WARREN -before you start, Ahmed - sorry to interrupt, but I just want to say, Oliver, that I've known Ahmed most of my life - been close friends since our Navy days - and he's as patriotic as the next man. He came over to this country, he didn't hide away, he joined the forces and he served. I just want to clear that up. I know you can speak for yourself Ahmed, but hell, I'm a little drunk and I just want Oliver to know that some of the things you've had to deal with - well, it's bloody unfair.

AHMED Thanks. Thank you Warren. Anyway Oliver, I can't complain too much. Haven't had it as bad as some.

WARREN Come on, mate. You lost your contract with the Daily Telegraph. Your mosque got burned down. Some mob got out of control and burned down his mosque, Oliver. That's not right. That's going too far.

AHMED Well, I think that after March-fifteen we all expected some form of retribution.

WARREN Yes, but come on Ahmed -

AHMED Warren, please.

WARREN Sure.

AHMED Oliver, I've had kids down the street throw a few bricks through my windows. Look, I don't necessarily blame them. I rang their parents and offered to come and have a chat with them. Some accepted, some didn't, some hung up on me. And as Warren said, the newspaper didn't want me anymore. Not my colleagues, they were more pissed at management than I was. But I can certainly understand management's position. Oh yeah, and some drunk bloke gave me a black eye in the street one day.

OLIVER Did you report him? There's a hotline, you know.

AHMED What's the point? All I'm saying is - well - it was always going to get worse before it got better.

WARREN Mate, you were a serviceman for this country.

AHMED The man in the street's not to know that, is he?

WARREN Well, sometimes I don't understand what keeps you going.

AHMED What keeps me going. The dead, the displaced, the poisoned. A city gone. A black eye, a rock through a window, having to work freelance, pray at home - pales in comparison, really.

OLIVER And your son? Warren mentioned you have a son.

AHMED Yes, Hameem. It's harder for him, harder for all young people, I think. He's angry, angry at everyone. Me, non-Muslims, the world, himself.

OLIVER Himself?

AHMED He's finishing a doctorate in biological chemistry. Mind you, hasn't touched it since he came back from Africa.

OLIVER Was that after the Ides?

AHMED A week after. Now he just mopes around all day.

OLIVER I don't know him, but I'm sure in time...

WARREN We all need time, don't we? The whole damn country.

AHMED (*to WARREN*) I mentioned to Hameem that Laura would like to see him. Hopefully she can get through to him.

WARREN You two going on the March of Unity?

OLIVER Yeah, probably.

AHMED Yes.

WARREN Good. Laura's not, you know.

AHMED Yes, she told me.

WARREN I'm going over there afterwards, for Mark.

OLIVER Mark?

WARREN My son.

OLIVER That's right, I remember now. You had a photo of him in your cabin.

WARREN Yes. Mark died in the Ides. He was down there at the MCG with his fiancée Stacey, watching the footy. Carlton/Hawthorne, it was. Christ, what you remember. I miss the poor bugger. Stacey – she lost an arm, her eyesight in the blast. Survived though. Lives with Laura now.

OLIVER I'm sorry.

WARREN (*shrugging*) I'm one of millions. Funny how that dilutes the impact somehow. Nowadays personal grief seems so... I don't know, indulgent. Selfish, even. Laura probably wouldn't agree.

OLIVER I've just put two and two together. You talking about your ex-wife, Doctor Laura Hammond?

WARREN (*raising a glass*) That's the merry old buzzard. The flag-eater for the liberal left.

OLIVER Don't know much about her, to tell the truth. Don't read that much.

WARREN Heh, I'll tell her that. That'll piss her off no end. She doesn't mind being disagreed with – in fact, she loves it, feeds her furnace – but she absolutely hates to be ignored.

AHMED Don't listen to him, Oliver. She's not that bad.

WARREN Oh come on, man! The Social Obligation Act takes us back to Nazi Germany! Community means harmonious disunity! The Freedom Act is the ultimate political oxymoron! Those are all direct quotes, by the way.

AHMED She's allowed to concerned, Warren.

WARREN You're not going to start defending her, I hope?

AHMED Not at all. For one, she doesn't need me to. Look, there's always going to be the voice of dissent. That's not a bad thing. And at least she's articulate.

WARREN Honestly, after what's happened in the last year, does she really think that shouting from the rooftops about civil liberties is what anyone wants to hear? So what if a few freedoms are curtailed! We can get them back. In the meantime, she's just endangering her own safety and pissing a lot of people off. Sometimes I just want to slap her face, ask her to open her fucking eyes. See what the hell's happened. See the look in people's eyes. They don't want freedom, they don't care about personal liberty, they just want to feel safe, for Christ's sake! Sorry Oliver. Must think I'm as mad as her.

OLIVER No, not mad. Overwrought, maybe.

WARREN You said it, brother. And she also forgets the government sought and received dispensation from the UN, NATO, the EU, the US – the whole bloody lot – to temporarily suspend Australia's adherence to human rights conventions. It's not like we're running Guantanamo out here. If the international community can recognise the necessity for what we need to do, why the fuck can't she? And now, now I will shut up.

OLIVER And have another drink.

WARREN And have another drink. Thank you, Oliver.

OLIVER You know, between us, there's something I just don't get. That domestic cell. I mean, weren't they born here, raised here in Australia, most of them? So how? How could they do it?

AHMED I often wonder: did their families have any idea?

WARREN Good lord, Ahmed. What family has any idea about their children?

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