

HUMAN VOICES

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Based on the novel by
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FADE IN:

BLACK SCREEN:

Distantly at first and then more clearly we hear a single piano note repeated, gently but insistently.

1

INT. PIANO SHOP - DAY

1

CLOSE ON: a finger playing the single note.

CLOSE ON: The white felt hammer striking the string as a tuning wrench adjusts the tension.

ANOTHER ANGLE: The shop crowded with brand new grand pianos, Mr Asra (67), baggy suit, patterned bow tie and woolen waistcoat, methodically adjusts the tension of the string. Sitting on the floor, back to the wall amidst the piano legs, his daughter, Annie (18), pretty with big eyes and dark hair, dressed in a school skirt and blouse, doing her homework.

2

EXT. WOODLAND CLEARING - DAY

2

A clearing, shafts of late afternoon sun pierce through the trees and beyond a large ex-ambulance, packed with recording equipment ('The Laundry Van') is parked. Sitting on the ground, back to a tree is a young looking Sam Brooks, (40's) Head of BBC Recorded Programmes. He is wearing headphome, notebook on his knees and listening intently eyes closed. Suddenly his eyes snap open and he looks around, then a head pops up from the undergrowth, mousy hair, freckles and headphones again, Willie Sharpe (17) has also heard something. Willie crawls forwards to check a large microphone set on a low stand in the middle of the clearing. Sam and Willie both looks across at Teddy(20), short brown hair, grey suit, who is dozing by recording van. Sam aims an accurate conker.

SAM

Change the record, Edward.

TEDDY

Yes sir, Mr Brooks. Sorry, I wasn't sleeping, I was just thinking.

SAM

Of course you were. Will just edge it back a little I am still hearing the wind.

Teddy hurriedly clambers into the van to replace the recording disc as Willie adjusts the Microphone.

life they both run after it and climb aboard. We read the sign on the van: 'BBC Outside Broadcast Unit'.

TITLES START

8 **EXT. BROADCASTING HOUSE - DAY**

8

Sky. Then the camera moves down to see the aerial that stands behind the BBC flag, continuing on to reveal the deep curve of the building spreading backward like the prow of a vast ocean liner. Past the fifth and fourth floors, onto the third floor with the DG's office, it's balcony filled with flowers and the statue of Prospero and Ariel finally reaching the entrance, half hidden by sandbags piled up to protect against bomb damage and a waiting taxi parked nearby.

TITLE: HUMAN VOICES

Over the above we hear a montage of voices: 'The BBC has received reports that Germans troops have this morning crossed into Poland...', 'Baking a loaf of bread is one of the most satisfying family tasks and fills a house with ...', 'Here is the Weather forecast for the British Isles for the next twenty four hours...'

9 **INT. SAM'S OFFICE, BH - DAY**

9

A large office overlooking Portland Place, dominated by an art deco desk with a swivel chair. There are two further chairs and a cocktail cabinet against one wall which give the room an oddly domestic feel, countered by the brown files and cardboard record sleeves piled high on every available surface.

There is a trolley with a turntable on which is currently playing: 'The Teddy Bear's Picnic. Sam, in shirtsleeves is standing at a small table speaking through a fabric disc into a microphone which is in front of the open window. Paper windmills tied to the table, spin wildly

SAM
(into mic)
Testing testing, Windssock three, in...
er... wind, I suppose. Hello, hello...
(changes fabric)
Testing testing, Windssock four... Hello,
hello...

The phone rings, Sam picks it up.

SAM (CONT'D)
Recorded programmes?

10 **INT. SWITCHBOARD, BH SEVENTH FLOOR - DAY**

10

Four girls sit at a switchboard, routing calls, internal and external, with a tapestry of wires in front of them. We notice one of them, a startlingly beautiful girl with short cut dark hair, Della Street (24).

DELLA

DP for you Mr Brooks.

SAM

(irritated)

Tell him I'm in the middle of a very important...

DELLA

(interrupting)

Mr Haggard says it's urgent.

She plugs the call through.

11 **INT. JEFF'S OFFICE - DAY**

11

Deco desk, drinks cabinet, meeting table, the furniture is the same as Sam's office but the effect completely different. Jeff Haggard (50's), Director Of Program Planning, has an office as immaculate and elusive as himself. Formally dressed in a narrow blue pinstripe, he has an air of detached resignation which only serves to make him more attractive.

JEFF

(on phone)

Sam, have you opened your sealed envelope? Mrs Milne will have put it on your desk, it says 'DO NOT OPEN' in large letters on the front.

12 **INT. SAM'S OFFICE, FOURTH FLOOR - DAY**

12

Sam looks around the clutter of his office that no amount of secretarial intervention can actually control and starts to look through it. He is shouting to be heard over the music.

SAM

(phone under his chin,
looking)

Well, I'm hardly likely to have opened it then, am I?

13 **INT. JEFF'S OFFICE, FOURTH FLOOR - DAY**

13

JEFF
(meaningfully)
'The Fat's in the Fire'.

SAM
What?

JEFF
(slowly)
'The Fat is in the Fire'.

He looks over the top of the desk and sees an envelope on the floor.

14 **INT. SAM'S OFFICE, FOURTH FLOOR - DAY**

14

Sam picks up and cautiously examines it.

SAM
The Fat is in the Fire?

JEFF (O.S.)
It's the BBC code word, to open the bloody envelope.

SAM
(reading)
'Emergency instructions in the event of War'?

He starts to open it.

15 **INT. CORRIDOR, FIFTH FLOOR - DAY**

15

A tall and theatrical looking man in his early forties, Announcer Edward Haliburton, is moving at a stately pace down the corridor with ' Talks Producer' John Stannard (28) and two young AP's (Assistant Producers).

STANNARD
Gravity without pomposity, no sense of negativity, an overall feeling of careful optimism but absolutely no crowing.

HALIBURTON
Don't worry dear boy, I'm not going to frighten the horses. Do you have a 'Fisherman's Friend' on you, by any chance?

Stannard is prepared for this and turns to one of the AP's who produces a packet of cough lozenges as they turn into the Studio.

16 **INT. HALLWAY, ASRA HOUSE - NIGHT** 16

A tiled Edwardian hallway with a small table and an umbrella stand. A large middle aged woman, Auntie Nora (60's) comes bustling in through the front door, breathless.

AUNTIE NORA

(loud)

Turn on the wireless, quickly. Turn it on.

She goes through into the front parlor.

17 **INT. FRONT PARLOR, ANNIE'S HOUSE - DAY** 17

Two armchairs in front of the empty fireplace, family photographs on the mantelpiece, a concert poster on one wall, an upright piano but no music. Annie and Mr Asra are already sitting in front of a large wireless set tuned to the BBC, Auntie Nora stops to catch her breath.

AUNT NORA

I though I's missed it.

The other two shush her.

HALIBURTON (V.O.)

In the next two minutes you will be asked to adjust your sets to a wavelength of 391 metres or 449 metres.

18 **INT. NEWS STUDIO, FOURTH FLOOR - NIGHT** 18

Haliburton, is sat at a small desk with a microphone in front of him. He is reading from a script. Stannard sitting in front of him holds up his hands and counts down the last five seconds to the hour.

HALIBURTON (V.O.)

From that time on Broadcasting in the United Kingdom will, until further notice be confined to those two wavelengths.

19 **INT. CANTEEN, BROADCASTING HOUSE - NIGHT** 19

The canteen is still, actors, announcers, programme staff, canteen workers, all listening the broadcast on the loudspeakers.

HALIBURTON (V.O.)

A single programme without alternatives will be broadcast continuously on these two wavelengths from 7am until 12.15

(MORE)

HALIBURTON (V.O.) (CONT'D)
midnight, it will be called the BBC Home
Service.

20

INT. JEFF'S OFFICE, BROADCASTING HOUSE - DAY

20

Six men and a woman sit round a narrow oval table,
looking a little like a dinner party with no dinner.
Three of the men are in Uniform, Col Harrison, (60)
Ministry of Information, Major Fishburn (55) War Office,
and Major Wallace (30's), with them are Jeff, Stannard,
and two other BBC Executives.

COL HARRISON

The Ministry's key concern now will be to
set in place the 'Approvals' process as
discussed.

JEFF

I though we'd all had been approved.

MAJOR FISHBURN

Staff vetting is well in hand, the
concerns are related to guest speakers,
members of the public and of course
'artists' working under freelance
contracts.

JEFF

Artists?

MAJOR FISHBURN

Musicians, actors...

JEFF

I know what an artist is, thank you
Major, but how are we supposed to vet
them all. Why do we need to? Actors
speak the lines we write and Musicians
simply play the notes in front of them,
they're not likely to be asked their
opinion of the political situation!

COL HARRISON

I think you underestimate 'talent', Mr
Haggard, there is the question of
intonation. A seditious artist might
interpret what he is asked to say or play
inappropriately.

STANNARD

And what about talks? We don't have
scripts for everything.

COL HARRISON

The Ministry is confident that the
transmission delay will allow an
acceptable level emergency control. We

(MORE)

COL HARRISON (CONT'D)

also believe that our vetting process will exclude all but the most determined saboteur. Besides according to the Radio Times it's mainly gramophone records as I see it. The Ministry have very few worries there.

(quick smile)

You fellows do an excellent job of reassurance and we want that to continue.

21 INT. STUDIO CONTROL ROOM - DAY

21

Close on a recording arm, and a spinning disc.

KING GEORGE VI

(actual recording)

In this grave hour, perhaps the most fateful in our history, I send to every household of my p-p-p

There is a whoosh as a hand reverses the disc and marks up the cue. Sam carefully replaces the needles, makes a mark and starts again:

SAM

One more time.

KING GEORGE VI (O.S.)

In this grave hour, perhaps the most fateful in our history, I send to every household of my...

(disk change)

...peoples, both at home and overseas, this message, spoken with the same depth of feeling for each one of you as if I were able to cross your threshold and speak to you myself.

Sam is standing in front of a line of eight turntables, all revolving, but the needle arms are raised, except for one. Pinned behind the machines is a typed cue sheet with 'in' and 'out' points marked which mirror marks on the discs themselves.

WILLIE

What's the point of editing it, if everybody's already heard it?

SAM

(through his concentration)

Not everyone has, Willie. This is for the Empire transmission tonight. We in Britain don't mind a little Royal hesitation, the occasional stutter has its own unique charm. But out there, in the rest of the world, in Africa, in

(MORE)

SAM (CONT'D)

India, let alone Australia... Well, they may not be quite so broad minded shall we say? So we are giving them something beautiful... a bloody perfect, royal 'take'.

KING GEORGE VI (O.S.)

For the second time in the lives of most of us we are at war. Over and over again we have tried to find a peaceful way out of the differences between ourselves and those who are now our enemies. But it has been in vain.

22

INT. NEWS STUDIO, FOURTH FLOOR - DAY

22

Teddy has headphones on and is listening to a disc as Jeff enters and is about to leave again when Teddy turns to see him.

TEDDY

(taking phones off)

Can I help you?

JEFF

(cautious)

I don't think so.

TEDDY

(proudly)

This is the news studio.

JEFF

Really?

TEDDY

I'm cueing up tracks for the six o'clock news. Of course they won't start rehearsing for another hour. Not everyone realizes how much work goes into the news.

JEFF

I'm sure that's right.

TEDDY

They think the news announcer is just making it up. But did you know everything is scripted and timed, down to the last second.

JEFF

Fascinating, isn't it?

Turns to go.

TEDDY

(pointing)

That's what we call the timeless clock. We use it to count into the cue for the reader. 'Coming up in ten seconds... nine.... eight. Do you know the secret of writing a great news story.

JEFF

(sincerely)

I wish I did.

TEDDY

The first sentence must interest and the second inform.

JEFF

Really? Well you must excuse me, I was actually looking for someone.

Teddy gets up to open the door for him.

JEFF (CONT'D)

Thank you.

TEDDY

(breezily)

Happy to be of help.

He returns to his work.

23

INT. RECORDED PROGRAM LIBRARY, FIFTH FLOOR - DAY

23

A long narrow room on the fifth floor filled with shelves holding acetate discs in neat racks. At a desk near the door the librarian, Mrs Staples (50's) tall, angular, formidable, dressed in a dark suit is issuing instructions to the RP's (Recorded Programme Assistants) who are lined up in front of her desk like soldiers. There are six of them, all strikingly pretty, among them veteran Vi Simmons (21) short brown hair and a quick smile, and newly arrived Lise Bernard (19) blue eyes and short blonde hair.

MRS STAPLES

Betty, Religious Affairs, want something Choral but not German, so no Bach, no Handel, no Hayden, no Beethoven, try Purcell. Vi, News want marching soldiers, three alternatives.

VI

Nationality? Mrs Staples.

MRS STAPLES

Anything in boots, dear, now run along. Lise, Talks want everything we've got on
(MORE)

MRS STAPLES (CONT'D)

Mr Churchill for 'Men of our Time', you may need a trolley so get one of the boys to help you.

Lise goes to follow Vi.

MISS STAPLES

(staring at her bust)

Oh and Lise? Mr Brooks wants to have a word with you. He likes to meet the new Assistants personally. Six fifteen, don't be late.

LISE

Yes. Miss Staples.

Lise hurries after Vi.

24

INT. CANTEEN, BROADCASTING HOUSE - NIGHT

24

The canteen is surprisingly busy for the hour, we notice a group of European journalists are arguing at a table. Teddy is sat with Willie drinking tea looking across at Jeff at the counter ordering two large whiskies.

TEDDY

I didn't know you could order alcohol in the canteen.

WILLE

Admin Grade 2 and above.

TEDDY

(indicating)

So who's the old bloke with the Scotch?

Willie turns to see Jeff heading towards Haliburton who is sitting across the room.

WILLE

Mr Haggard, Director of Programme Planning.

TEDDY

(taking this in)

Right. So he'd probably know what the timeless clock was.

WILLE

Haggard? Of course. Why?

TEDDY

Nothing.

Teddy puts his head in his hands as Jeff sits opposite Haliburton.

HALIBURTON

Thank you dear boy.

JEFF

So, what did you want to talk about?

HALIBURTON

(slowly)

I am gravely concerned about Belgium.

JEFF

I'm sorry to hear that, Edward.

(quick smile)

Worried about any interruption to the chocolate supply I presume?

HALIBURTON

(conspiratorially)

I am concerned, dear boy, at the methods used by the invading enemy. In particular the use of news announcers as an offensive weapon.

JEFF

(nodding in agreement)

What were they doing, lobbing them over the city walls?

HALIBURTON

The Enemy substituted their own news readers and their own news and the poor Belgians couldn't tell the difference!

Jeff considers this.

JEFF

I see. So you're suggesting special protection for Announcers, in the event of invasion?

HALIBURTON

Identification. That's my suggestion: 'Identification'.

Jeff puts down his whiskey.

JEFF

Ah!

(the light dawns)

Credit! You want a credit!

(grins)

This is about credits?

HALIBURTON

I am merely pointing out, Jeff, that if the public knew our names then it would be much harder for a substitute to impersonate us.

JEFF

Brilliant. What were you thinking?
Changing the nine o'clock news to the 'Ed
Haliburton Hour'? I like that, it's
catchy.

HALIBURTON

(earnestly)

I'm being serious, Jeff, I've spoken with
the other station announcers and we all
agree it would be in the interests of the
country.

25

EXT. STAIRS, BROADCASTING HOUSE - DAY

25

Lise with Vi, who is carrying a stack of discs, climb the
stairs. They pass small groups of smokers chatting as the
stairs operate as an informal meeting place.

LISE

Why does he want to talk to me? I don't
know anything.

VI

He won't mind, it's talking he's
interested in, not listening. Oh, and
he'll probably tell you that your face
reminds him of a face he's seen in a
painting, but he can't remember which
one.

LISE

Oh.

(considering this)

Does he ever remember?

VI

No, not usually.

26

INT. SIXTH FLOOR CORRIDOR, BROADCASTING HOUSE - DAY

26

Lise and Vi appear from the stairwell as Teddy
approaches.

VI

(indicating)

Third door on the left not counting the
stationary cupboard or the Gents toilet.

Teddy who is passing overhears this.

TEDDY

I'll show you.

VI

Leave her alone Teddy, she's not interested.

Lise walks off counting doors and Teddy stands with Vi watching her.

TEDDY

Half French.
(knowledgeably)
You can see it in the walk can't you?

VI

(dry)
And she's got a boyfriend. He's completely French and in the French army.

TEDDY

(trumping her)
And he's an electrician. Sca-ry!
(grin)
Only trying to help.

VI

Then you can take these to Studio Two!

She gives him the discs and watches Lise go in.

27

INT. MRS MILNE'S OFFICE, FOURTH FLOOR - DAY

27

Mrs Milne is sitting at her desk looking particularly fierce, polishing her glasses as Lise comes in.

LISE

Mr Brooks asked to see me, Mrs Milne.

MRS MILNE

(disapproving)
Have you eaten?

LISE

(worried)
Well...

MRS MILNE

Only he's ordered sandwiches specially.

She gets up to open the door.

28

INT. SAM'S OFFICE, FOURTH FLOOR - DAY

28

Sam is sitting with his back to the door listening to something on headphones. A tray of sandwiches and a thermos flask of tea are sitting on a nearby table. Mrs Milne taps him on the shoulder.

MRS MILNE

Miss Bernard to see you Mr Brooks, the new RP assistant. Will there be anything else?

SAM

(getting up)

No, thank you, we'll manage won't we, Miss Barnard?

Lise stands hesitantly in the doorway.

SAM (CONT'D)

(briskly)

Thank you Mrs Milne.

(to Lise)

Don't be nervous! Everyone finds this building a little strange at first. Have a seat. Fish paste, Mrs Milne informs me. Help yourself.

(Lise stares at the sandwiches)

You know, we only met for a few minutes at the interview, but I was immediately struck by something about you... er...

LISE

Lise.

(helpfully)

It's French for Elizabeth.

SAM

Thank you... well Lise, I couldn't put my finger on it at first and then I suddenly realized what it was. This!

(he holds up his finger and thumb an inch apart)

The space between your eyes! I've seen never anything quite like it except... Well I suppose I have once, now that I think about it, in one those portraits by er... um... you know the ones I mean. It's an absolutely definite indicator of 'emotional intelligence', as I'm sure you're aware.

Sam puts on his glasses and inspects Lisa and then at the uneaten sandwiches.

SAM (CONT'D)

(suddenly energized)

You're quite right. Un-bloody-eatable. About as convincingly fish as I am. Or more accurately less convincingly fish than I am if Mr Darwin is to be believed. Don't worry.

Sam gets up and picks up the phone.

LISE
(anxiously)
I'm not really hungry, thank you Mr
Brooks.

SAM
(ignoring her)
Yes. Yes. Can you put me through to the
canteen? Hello? I have a young assistant
here, quite new to the Corporation -
completely unable to eat your
sandwiches...
(he smiles reassuringly at
Lise)
No, I can't, I was rather hoping for a
suggestion from you.

LISE
(half getting up)
I don't want anything, really I don't.

SAM
(to phone)
Well, if that's the best you can do. Yes
please, right away.

He puts the phone down.

SAM (CONT'D)
You were quite right to protest. What is
the BBC without standards! A pork pie
intended for the third floor is on it's
way up, as we speak.

He sits opposite her and leans forward.

SAM (CONT'D)
Tell me, do you ever think about the
future?

LISE
Yes. I do.

This seems to have an unexpectedly big effect on Lise and
her eyes begin well up. Sam, not noticing ploughs on.

SAM
Good. I thought so. I think about it all
the time. I think the future's the only
thing that's worth thinking about. I mean
the present's obvious, it's right under
our nose, literally!
(looks down at the fish paste
and removes it)
But the future is always hidden, except
up here.
(his brain)
Imagine this... waking up one morning and
(MORE)

SAM (CONT'D)
saying to me...
(searches for the right
example)
...I wonder how Socrates sounded the
afternoon he drank hemlock! And me
replying: 'Miss Staples, bring me
Socrates, speeches, 378-379BC, now!
Because that's exactly what our children
will be able to do, and our children's
children.

Lise looks even more distressed.

SAM (CONT'D)
(oblivious)
Everything important that is said, will
be recorded and we, the BBC, will have
that recording preserved, forever, for
everyone. That is the purpose of our
work in the Recorded Programmes
Department.
(pointing at the space
between his eyes)
You understand passion, Elisabeth. You
understand what it means to have one idea
that drives out every other. The
placement of the windshield on a
microphone, as one example, may seem of
little consequence to some people, but
you and I know that is can...

Lise tears in her eyes, struggles up and runs out of the
room.

SAM (CONT'D)
Miss Barnard?

29

INT. STAIRS, BH - DAY

29

Della and Teddy sit smoking on the stairs as Lise hurries
past them.

TEDDY
Bad news?

Lise does not reply.

TEDDY (CONT'D)
Had to happen.

DELLA
What did?

TEDDY
(it's obvious)
He tried to jump her.