

TED Talk Script

Rives: 4am Mystery

This is a recent comic strip from the Los Angeles Times. The punch line? "On the other hand, I don't have to get up at four every single morning to milk my Labrador." This is a recent cover of New York Magazine. Best hospitals where doctors say they would go for cancer treatment, births, strokes, heart disease, hip replacements, 4 a.m. emergencies. And this is a song medley I put together --

0:35(Music)

0:55Did you ever notice that four in the morning has become some sort of meme or shorthand? It means something like you are awake at the worst possible hour.

1:04(Laughter)

1:05A time for inconveniences, mishaps, yearnings. A time for plotting to whack the chief of police, like in this classic scene from "The Godfather." Coppola's script describes these guys as, "exhausted in shirt sleeves. It is four in the morning."

1:20(Laughter)

1:21A time for even grimmer stuff than that, like autopsies and embalmings in Isabel Allende's "The House of the Spirits." After the breathtaking green-haired Rosa is murdered, the doctors preserve her with unguents and morticians' paste. They worked until four o'clock in the morning.

1:36A time for even grimmer stuff than that, like in last April's New Yorker magazine. This short fiction piece by Martin Amis starts out, "On September 11, 2001, he opened his eyes at 4 a.m. in Portland, Maine, and Mohamed Atta's last day began." For a time that I find to be the most placid and uneventful hour of the day, four in the morning sure gets an awful lot of bad press --

2:03(Laughter)

2:04across a lot of different media from a lot of big names. And it made me suspicious. I figured, surely some of the most creative artistic minds in the world, really, aren't all defaulting back to this one easy trope like they invented it, right? Could it be there is something more going on here? Something deliberate, something secret, and who got the four in the morning bad rap ball rolling anyway? I say this guy -- Alberto Giacometti,

shown here with some of his sculptures on the Swiss 100 franc note. He did it with this famous piece from the New York Museum of Modern Art. Its title -- "The Palace at Four in the Morning --

2:44(Laughter)

2:461932. Not just the earliest cryptic reference to four in the morning I can find. I believe that this so-called first surrealist sculpture may provide an incredible key to virtually every artistic depiction of four in the morning to follow it. I call this The Giacometti Code, a TED exclusive. No, feel free to follow along on your Blackberries or your iPhones if you've got them.

3:12It works a little something like -- this is a recent Google search for four in the morning. Results vary, of course. This is pretty typical. The top 10 results yield you four hits for Faron Young's song, "It's Four in the Morning," three hits for Judi Dench's film, "Four in the Morning," one hit for Wislawa Szymborska's poem, "Four in the Morning." But what, you may ask, do a Polish poet, a British Dame, a country music hall of fame all have in common besides this totally excellent Google ranking?

3:44Well, let's start with Faron Young -- who was born incidentally in 1932.

3:51(Laughter)

3:53In 1996, he shot himself in the head on December ninth -- which incidentally is Judi Dench's birthday.

4:02(Laughter)

4:05But he didn't die on Dench's birthday. He languished until the following afternoon when he finally succumbed to a supposedly self-inflicted gunshot wound at the age of 64 -- which incidentally is how old Alberto Giacometti was when he died.

4:20Where was Wislawa Szymborska during all this? She has the world's most absolutely watertight alibi. On that very day, December 10, 1996 while Mr. Four in the Morning, Faron Young, was giving up the ghost in Nashville, Tennessee, Ms. Four in the Morning -- or one of them anyway -- Wislawa Szymborska was in Stockholm, Sweden, accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature. 100 years to the day after the death of Alfred Nobel himself. Coincidence? No, it's creepy.

4:50(Laughter)

4:52Coincidence to me has a much simpler metric. That's like me telling you, "Hey, you know the Nobel Prize was established in 1901, which coincidentally is the same year Alberto Giacometti was born?" No, not everything fits so tidily into the paradigm, but that does not mean there's not something going on at the highest possible levels. In fact there are people in this room who may not want me to show you this clip we're about to see.

5:18(Laughter)

5:19Video: Homer Simpson: We have a tennis court, a swimming pool, a screening room -- You mean if I want pork chops, even in the middle of the night, your guy will fry them up?

5:26Herbert Powell: Sure, that's what he's paid for. Now do you need towels, laundry, maids?

5:31HS: Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait -- let me see if I got this straight. It is Christmas Day, 4 a.m. There's a rumble in my stomach.

5:38Marge Simpson: Homer, please.

5:40Rives: Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Let me see if I got this straight, Matt.

5:45(Laughter)

5:47When Homer Simpson needs to imagine the most remote possible moment of not just the clock, but the whole freaking calendar, he comes up with 0400 on the birthday of the Baby Jesus. And no, I don't know how it works into the whole puzzling scheme of things, but obviously I know a coded message when I see one.

6:10(Laughter)

6:11I said, I know a coded message when I see one. And folks, you can buy a copy of Bill Clinton's "My Life" from the bookstore here at TED. Parse it cover to cover for whatever hidden references you want. Or you can go to the Random House website where there is this excerpt. And how far down into it you figure we'll have to scroll to get to the golden ticket? Would you believe about a dozen paragraphs? This is page 474 on your paperbacks if you're following along: "Though it was getting better, I still wasn't satisfied with the inaugural address. My speechwriters must have been tearing their hair out because as we worked between one and four in the morning on Inauguration Day, I was still changing it."

6:52 Sure you were, because you've prepared your entire life for this historic quadrennial event that just sort of sneaks up on you. And then --

7:00 (Laughter)

7:02 three paragraphs later we get this little beauty: "We went back to Blair House to look at the speech for the last time. It had gotten a lot better since 4 a.m." Well, how could it have? By his own writing, this man was either asleep, at a prayer meeting with Al and Tipper or learning how to launch a nuclear missile out of a suitcase. What happens to American presidents at 0400 on inauguration day? What happened to William Jefferson Clinton? We might not ever know. And I noticed, he's not exactly around here today to face any tough questions.

7:36 (Laughter)

7:38 It could get awkward, right? I mean after all, this whole business happened on his watch. But if he were here --

7:44 (Laughter)

7:45 he might remind us, as he does in the wrap-up to his fine autobiography, that on this day Bill Clinton began a journey -- a journey that saw him go on to become the first Democrat president elected to two consecutive terms in decades. In generations. The first since this man, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who began his own unprecedented journey way back at his own first election, way back in a simpler time, way back in 1932 -- (Laughter)

8:19 the year Alberto Giacometti

8:20 (Laughter)

8:22 made "The Palace at Four in the Morning." The year, let's remember, that this voice, now departed, first came a-cryin' into this big old crazy world of ours.

8:33 (Music)

8:57 (Applause)