



I Think the Sun is Shining

By Dan Lewis

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Why do elephants drink?

To forget. That joke was never funny but I have to laugh, because if I cry I'll waste whisky tears, spattering in my ashtray, then drink them right up again.

I am whisky fumes from ageing pores, bad bleeding through amber veins, my sozzled heart coursing whisky through everything I am and can ever be.

Standing in my lounge and toasting my red-eyed reflection, half a bottle left to help this elephant forget. All this liquid, and my mouth is dry. All this head spin, and memories still carousel.

Work in three hours' time. There, they'll know the part Talisker plays as it flows from breath and actions: a fummy, fatty cloak for all to see.

If I wake. Sip left. Fall, sleep, forget...

To your health, mate. You look tired. You should-

Empty glass shatters and I watch dancing shards shine, have a fine time, as I sink to see them settle, whisky-coated and free. Shall I wake? Not my problem. I'll forget to wake. Forget.

PAUSE

I wake.

My problem, again.

Slowly conscious, I'm late. June sun filters through blinds. Sweaty heavy-headed, I rush to my feet and heave before I reach the toilet bowl.

I decide against shaving, coat teeth with toothpaste, gargle mouthwash. As if minty breath will mask the state I'm in. I jump the tube, wolf down sausage and egg

McMuffin as I walk to the office. Ignore a phone call from Dad. Collapse in my seat and await the inevitable dressing-down.

Life's been like this for a while. Ridiculous, really. Thirty-seven and less capable than the uni-dropouts surrounding me. They think I'm hilarious. I played along at first, let them believe I was out late every night when the stubble, creased shirts and stale sweet stink started accompanying me to work. Now, I'm sure, they know my truth is less glamorous.

Ridiculous.

PAUSE

Three whiskys into the night, I acknowledge that I am what Sophie warned me I'd become. I stand and watch my reflection. Six-one tall, looking just as wide. And I'm expanding. Light sweat coats my lips, my temple, and I'm pale. Like my soul's been pumped out of me.

PAUSE

Still drunk but punctual, I dial Dad's number as I walk from London Bridge station.

"You didn't return my calls yesterday," he says.

"Everything alright?"

"It's Auntie Bonnie."

"She okay?" I ask.

"Not really, Jim, no."

I stop walking. "What's wrong with her?"

"Doctors reckon it's Alzheimer's."

"But she's not even sixty," I say.

"Younger onset, that's what they're calling it."

My hangover truly kicks in, shirt clinging to skin as my stomach cries. "I don't understand."

Dad exhales. "She started acting...erratically a few months back. They did tests. They're pretty sure. The dementia's been setting in for a while now, just...keeping a low profile."

"I'm sorry, Dad."

"Yes, well...Please visit her." I hear emotion in his voice for the first time in two years. "You're her favourite."

I lean against a wall. The sun is too harsh and I crave water. I'm not close to Dad, but I still pity him. He lost his wife, now he's losing his sister too.

And by the time I reach the office, I'm late. I don't offer an excuse.

PAUSE

Sophie won the car when she left me, so I get the train to Auntie Bonnie's.

Twenty years ago, she was a successful artist. Her work still sells now. She's lived in St. John's Wood for as long as I can remember, in a soul-filled flat cluttered with paintings. She's never married or had kids, and couldn't be more different from her brother. Maybe that's why, when I was young, she meant more to me than Mum and Dad. After all, don't most children prefer their uncles and aunts?

It takes a while for her to answer the door and, when she does, she squints, momentarily surprised to see me.

"James," she says; a comforting, caramel voice. I'm always "James", never "Jim", to her.

I laugh, keen to keep the visit lighthearted. "You going to invite me in, then, Auntie?"

She ushers me over the threshold and gives me a hug, a second short of awkward. "It must be a year since I last saw you." She steps away from me. "Now, shut up and let me look at you."

She seems fine to me. Mid-fifties and wearing it well; forever my father's little sister. A few lines, especially around her mouth, and bags under eyes, yet she looks good for her age. She's a third of my size.

"Oh, James," she says, a sly smile growing. "Are you sure you're eating enough?"

I blush and pat my treacherous belly. "I'm just not very good at saying no."

"Evidently," she says with affection. "Let's get the kettle on."

As she walks me through to the kitchen, I realise I'm looking for signs of decline; as if an inability to maintain a tidy home will expose the mess in her mind. But everything is as I remember it and-

"It's okay, James," she says. "I'm fine."

"Sorry, Auntie."

"Call me Bonnie, for God's sake," she laughs, and grabs a jar from an open cupboard. "Black with two sugars?"

"As always," I reply.

She leads me through to the lounge, sits me in the maroon leather chair I used to sink into as a boy. It's torn and beaten and ridiculously comfortable. Beside it, on a coffee table, rests my steaming mug and a plate of the same biscuits she's always spoilt me with.

Bonnie stares at her mug cradled in tube map-vein hands. Then, as I reach for a Jammy Dodger, she points at the white telephone on top of the TV.

"What is that, James?"

I stop crunching and my heart plummets. "It's a phone, Auntie."

She smiles faintly. "It's okay. I know."

"Oh. Of course."

"A few months back I started to...not feel myself. I kept forgetting arrangements I'd made and...it sounds stupid, but I started leaving the caps off my oil paints."

"It happens to us all," I say.

"Nonsense. Anyway, one evening, I went to make a phone call, and couldn't recall the name of the object I'd grabbed. I held it in my hands, but it was alien to me. My mental block frightened me, so I went to the doctor."

"What did he say?"

"She. Nothing to begin with." Bonnie drinks her coffee slowly. "The doctors – I saw a few of them – conducted interviews and cognitive tests I barely understood. They were concerned because I'm relatively young."

"Practically a teenager," I say, mouth full of Bourbon biscuit.

She laughs appreciatively. "I involved your dad. He was there when they diagnosed me. *Younger-onset* Alzheimer's. Typical. I don't even get it when I'm aged and infirm."

"I'm sorry, Bonnie," I say.

"Don't be. It's more common than you'd guess."

We finish our coffees. She doesn't touch the biscuits. I stand and hug her.

"How's Sophie, then?" she asks once we break apart. "Any wedding plans yet?"

"We split up, Bonnie. Almost a year ago, now."

For the first time she looks anxious. "Oh, sorry, James. Sorry. Did you...did I know that already?"

I don't miss a beat. "Dad could have mentioned it, but I've hardly been shouting about it."

She looks distraught. "But you two were together years."

"Six years."

"Such a shame," she whispers, and I can't tell whether she's referring to the state of my life or the fact that she was doing so well up until the mention of Sophie's name.

PAUSE

Saturday's sun is low and tangerine, lighting my way home as it did when I was a child, a paper bag full of melting penny sweets in my fist. Except now, a takeaway bag swings from one hand, a bottle of Talisker from the other.

Back home, I twist open the bottle and drink.

Mogwai's music surrounds me and, as I swig, 'Scotland's Shame' builds: mournful and breath-stealingly beautiful. The song's so full of love, I almost can't bear to hear it. Love. I've read that that's the worst thing about dementia: not that it might happen to you, but to someone you love. You watch as everything you shared loses relevance to them, and have to accept that the one you love has died. They look the same, but they're no longer there. Dementia is a dimmer, not a light switch; it takes its time, but the end result is still darkness. You see them at their most vulnerable and you pray, I imagine, for just one hour – an *hour!* – of lucidity, an hour with them, as they were when you both fell in love, to tell them you love them, and you cry, surely you cry, and they smile and wipe your tears, and ask why you're crying, and the weight on your heart is unbearable, so you simply repeat "I love you" and pray that, if nothing else, they'll remember those tiny, immense words.

But Bonnie never married. Dad is there out of duty alone...which leaves me.

I toast and I drink and I mean it this time, I mean it. What I am is because of what I didn't do. So enough about me.

I swirl Talisker like sweet peaty mouthwash and sway as the tears come, for once ethereal.

PAUSE

It's in her eyes. A fading blue sea, calmer every time I see her.

Her smile's slighter, as if she's not sure what she's pleased about, but she embraces me and, within minutes, I'm in the maroon chair, coffee in hand. She doesn't offer biscuits; she hasn't in a while.

This is the fourth time I've visited since hearing her news two months ago. Dad's round almost every day and, when he's not, he's talking to social services, pre-empting what comes next.

Though, with every visit, I see more of Bonnie's defiance crumble away, experiencing what she's going through has exposed how pointless my life has become. So I'm drinking less. Plus this girl from work, Grace, has started throwing me smiles, presumably because I've lost weight. A couple of pounds, but it's a start.

Not that Bonnie notices.

Her voice is thinner now, irritable. "Your father sends people round. They clean. The kitchen, the bathroom. They do my..."

"Laundry?" I offer. This isn't the first time she's mislaid the word.

She smiles, unvictorious. "Laundry."

"It's to help-"

"How's Sophie?" she interrupts.

I drink, decide to be honest. "We broke up. A while ago now."

She nods, looks disappointed. In me, in herself. "You told me, didn't you? More than once, I imagine."

I fidget. "Yes. More than once."

"Okay," she says. "That's okay."

She looks around her lounge, studies it almost. It seems sparser, presumably cleaned by homecare workers or Dad.

"I don't do it anymore, you know," she confides.

"Do what?"

She clicks impatient fingers on right hand, as the left gracefully rises and falls. "All my life, until now."

"You don't paint anymore?"

She sighs. "It's difficult to explain."

"There's no need."

She stares into her mug and, soon after, I leave.

"Thank you for visiting, Joe," she says as she kisses me goodbye.

"It's a pleasure, Auntie," I reply. "But I'm James, remember?"

It pains me to see a mistake that most would dismiss as a slip of the tongue crush her. She's confused my name with Dad's before – a simple meshing of the J's – and I've let it go. But today I can't. Her eyes close as she nods.

LONG PAUSE

A vicious winter is thawing into spring, but I still feel the cold. I'd like to convince myself that's because I've lost two stone since Bonnie's diagnosis, but the truth is it's been a harsh season.

One night three weeks ago, Bonnie must have felt the chill. Dad found out about her decision to run a bath when her downstairs neighbour called at two in the morning to tell him water was streaming through their ceiling. He found Bonnie sitting on the edge of her bed, naked but for the towel bundled in her arms. Tepid water lapped at her ankles, but she remained motionless: a child dangling feet into her paddling pool.

I wish he hadn't made his decision, but I understand. The privately-run residential care home is only a few minutes walk from where Bonnie lived. I'm sure she never imagined her paintings would pay for others to keep her clean, but all of her savings and some of Dad's will pour into her stay here.

Bonnie's aged significantly over the last ten months, and fresh wrinkles and too-puckered lips suggest she's older than fifty-six. If she's been awaiting me she doesn't let on as I kiss her, then sit on the edge of her bed. Her hair's weaved with strands of grey, and her lips silently move. The air stinks of soapy perfume, but I suspect it's not her who sprayed it.

The irony's not lost on me: as Bonnie withers, I regain my youth. Sick of being sick, I've minimised the drink and reapplied myself at work enough to be considered a laugh, rather than a joke. Every lunchtime Grace steers me towards 'healthy choice' sandwiches; every work-night out, she lets me into her life. She's beautiful to me; mousey hair, with a sunshine laugh. I haven't made my move yet.

Sad as it is, I know that once conversation runs dry today, I can tell Bonnie again that I recently saved Grace from some sleazy idiot in a bar. It won't matter; she'll still ask how Sophie is.

"Do you want a cup of coffee, Auntie?" I ask. "Nice and strong, one sugar?"

She jerks, as if dragged from a dream. "Yes, one sugar, please."

I grab the kettle, out of harm's way on top of the wardrobe, and fill it from the corner washbasin. As it boils, I pull the biscuit selection box from my bag: Marks &

Sparks, of course. Nowadays, I find value in anything that spurs remembrance of past visits.

I show Bonnie what's on offer, but it's a push too far, and she implores me with milky eyes.

I pick out a digestive, break a piece off. "You like this one, Auntie."

She opens her mouth. Her breath is sour. I gently feed her, feel like a father, but her chewing is so distracted that I don't give her more. I pour the coffees, top hers up with cold water, and sit back on the bed.

"It's nice here, isn't it?" I ask between bites of pink wafer, unable to control my patronising tone. "The nurses seem lovely."

"I want to go home now," she says, sudden and certain. Her face sets like a rock.

I swallow scalding coffee. "You are home, Auntie."

"I want to go home now."

Cautiously, I ask, "Where's home?"

"James."

"Yes, I'm-"

"Home, James!" she shouts, amused by her line. "Home, James! Home, James!"

"You want to...go to your flat?" I ask, desperate to make sense of her words.

"With me?"

Bonnie snorts, more alive than she's been in weeks. "No. *No*. To *him*."

"To...James?"

She nods, exhales heavily. "A big boy now...I saw him."

"*Him*?" Forevermore third person, my heart burns.

"Always James to me. So common, Jim. Not *my* decision."

"James is a nice name," I say, struggling to follow her. I reach for a chocolate ring out of habit rather than hunger.

She stands and her mug slides to the floor. Cold coffee soaks pink slippers as she moves to the bed.

"I never saw him again."

The biscuit melts as my mouth dries. "Who, Bonnie?"

She laughs, incredulous. "His father!"

I breathe in sharp, lightheaded. I can't grasp her words yet I can.

"It's okay," she whispers. "Only Joe and Yvonne know."

"Know what?" I ask, still confused.

"1971. That's..."

"Thirty-eight years ago," I cut in, mouth parched, heart racing. The biscuit drops, smearing chocolate over sheets and shaking fingers.

"Different, then," she nods. "Only eighteen. It was common to..."

"What?" I ask.

Her eyes, voids for so long, widen and shine. "Beautiful. Didn't know I'd...feel like that."

I'm finding it difficult to hold myself together. "Feel like what?"

A goldfish aching to return to water, she eventually finds her words. "Torn apart."

What does someone say when their life flips, when a few words change the meaning of so many actions? When they realise that their memories have been endlessly misinterpreted?

I sit and watch her lips move. Like she's chewing thoughts. Stuck in the past, my mother doesn't notice the tears edging into my eyes.

"Eight years older," she suddenly continues. "Joe and Yvonne. Married."

"It was their idea?" I ask, resenting the couple. An uncle. An auntie. Nothing more.

"Like your heart breaking, again, again, again. Childish to complain." She grins. "'Auntie'. *Never* 'Aunt'."

This time it's me who lets the silence hang, in a room I want to escape. With her, piggybacked out if need be. She's so tiny she'd barely be noticed. Barely exists.

I rise and almost fall. It's difficult to breathe and sweat sidewinds from my temple. My head pirouettes, an empty bottle feeling.

Her eyes, deader by the second, do not follow me.

I dab a tissue to dry her tears, to minimise the chocolate stain on the bed.

"Do you see him?" she asks.

I freeze. "Sometimes."

She nods, doesn't recognise her son. He is a memory, the cherished past. There's no room in her mind for him and me.

"Is he still as big?" she asks.

"He's trying to lose weight."

"I don't remember."

I stifle tears. "It's okay, Bonnie. He remembers you."

She stares ahead and I know this is as close as we can consciously get.

"I'm going to go now," I say.

"Me too, I think."

I don't know how to respond so I lean in, kiss her cheek, note the tired smell of her skin, say, "I love you."

And leave.

PAUSE

I fix earphones in to drown thoughts in sound, pause outside an off license.

And then I'm moving.

I'm moving and I'm forcing 'Scotland's Shame' louder, until my ears ache as my heart aches, pumping blood around my body with new purpose, new direction, and I'm thinking: I'm going to ask her, tomorrow I'll ask Grace and it'll work, it has to work, because there's the chance I'll too succumb, forget as she forgot, so I must make the most of now because now is all I have and I want to fill my head, store a love story and the story of a life many miles from what it's been till now, because I could lose it, lose it all, so why would I *choose* to forget, that was wrong but this is me – a newborn – realising I'm going to live, the elephant that never forgets, who knows it may be a 'No' but could be a 'Yes', a 'Yes', a possibility, a future, a lake river sea of memories stored until I know no better, now nearing the station and 'Scotland's Shame' is loud and my heart is heaving, mind is flooding and I'm crumpling to the ground and I'm crying, and to see me you'd think I'd lost the world but I can't explain how much I've won, so I'm crying triumphant, on the ground outside the station, and the music's so loud and the song's so right even if its name is not, because I'm crying I'm sobbing but I'm not afraid and I'm not alone and I'm not Scottish and I'm not ashamed.

I am not ashamed.