

I should be able to control my own feet. That would seem to me to be a minimal requirement of a functioning fucking human being. I'm not talking about a bairn because that's a completely different kettle of fish but me, a grown man, about to enter his 32nd year of life, I should be able to control my feet. And I can't. I watch my size elevens down there where they've always been. They're doing a dance, a little dance of madness. The toes of my trainers are picking at the fag ends lost between the cracks in the paving slabs. There's a shadow at the back of my mind, a cancer waiting to pounce. It frightens me half-to-death. I'm standing about on the pavement on a cold February morning waiting for the arrival of my dad. I am wearing my Hibs strip. In my hands a football, a football squashed to an ugly, useless shape. I found it in the cupboard under the sexy magazines. I am useless at throwing things out. My dad has a pump in the car to save the day from being a disaster. He is taking me on a journey. He reckons I need to be away from home in a different environment so that I can scrape through this episode. His words. Scrape through.

Anything other than the hell of Ward 3.

Last night was a bit of a cracker, a real fireworks of delicious entertainment. You would have thought my old man would have read the signs. After all, he had lived through it all before even if he was on the outside. But then again, they were all on the outside. My mother. My sister. The police. The fire brigade. None of them has a handle on me. Last night, after eating what passes for food in the Royal Ed. I left ward 3 behind and had returned to my flat in Leith, abandoning Marlene and the endless sex on offer in her dark abode.

My mum and dad were there. My dad refuses to hand me back his key to my flat. They don't understand me. I look at them and there are times when I think I would be better off without them. They certainly would be better off without me. I'm unlovable, a crocodile with issues.

My mum she's the fusser. Fusses about this. Fusses about that. Panicking all the time. God knows what she would do in an emergency. I see her eyes all in a dizzy and her head is going up and down, backwards and forwards like some demented puppet. She wants to contain but she's hopeless. Blood on my knee invokes the last rites. Death is always imminent like a number 14 bus coming down the Bridges and taking the corner too quickly for its own good.

My dad. He's scary. He was round at Marlene's one night last week, warning me about this, telling me about that. Friendly advice, he calls it, twisting the long hairs of his beard over and over again. Take your medication, he says. Don't bully your sister. Get a grip. He shouted his little bullets at me and I shrank to a wee boy on the settee, being told off for truanting or stealing money from my mum's purse.

Last night I sized up the situation.

I said, dead politely, I needed a fag. Politeness is the gift that keeps on giving. They let me out of their sight. I was the compliant child, the one they always needed. They were glad to get rid of me. They live apart now and only meet to discuss my situation, dissecting the remains of my sanity. I know exactly what they will be saying. They will go over old ground, the need for the police to be involved, how to transport me back to the ward, about how many times the nurses must be told that I'm not well.

In my bedroom, it's magic. Three storeys high in a row of terraced houses. On a night like last night, I was the man in the moon. I opened the window and the wind blew all the bad stuff away. The fag smoke flew like an angry bat into the dark. Rain was in the air and the wind was up to mischief. A storm was brewing. My mind was a deep, calm pool where decisions rose from the surface like leaping fish. It was a night for flying, A night for Tommy to be an eagle whose outstretched wings were the size of Princes Street.

Outside the window is a balcony, not a balcony with a wee crappy metal fence around it but a balcony like the edge of a mountain top. I was at the peak of my powers. I could hear the rain pattering on the roofs of the cars, bubbles of moisture performing like trampoline artists. A lassie was combing her hair in a mirror in a flat opposite. An angry man flung a door open. She stood up and slapped the bloke across the face, the sound travelling straight into the pocket of my heart where I collect good thoughts and keep them warm and dry. I was god of all I surveyed. It was time for a new mythology and the birth of a different hero whose mental confusions

would lead the world into a deadly cul-de-sac, the battle between good and bad taking place within the confines of the mind, a landscape where bombs are the outdated currency of the tired, old dictators.

The good people of Iraq have been in my thoughts again, the statue of Saddam Hussein crashing down and all the dust rising into the superheated sky, and, for a second, shutting out the killer sun, but only for a moment, because the dust, like all dust, will settle into nooks and crannies of the mind where it all belongs. I am a collector of dust. That Saddam, I knew all about him. I had seen the secret documents in soft, sweaty hands long before Blair and Bush. The weapons of mass destruction hidden in caves in the mountains, hidden behind rocks bigger and heavier than the rock that Jesus pushed aside, the holes in his hands leaking heavenly bubbles of blood. I told my dad loud and clear. I said you don't know the Middle East. Its people are good people who won't take the invasion lying down. I saw that in their faces as Saddam toppled down, tons of hardened concrete which never belonged in the desert. Not now. Not anytime. The cradle of civilisation was not a place for concrete blocks.

I even constructed a drawing to help my dad because a picture can say more than a thousand words. The drawing said everything but my dad was too stupid to see what was in front of his face. I stabbed at the outline to make the situation crystal clear.

"Look," I said. "Jesus standing on top of the rock. You can see the way he is smiling. Just because they hurt you doesn't mean you can't survive."

"What is Jesus wearing?" he asked.

I could see he hated to be beaten. He wanted me to fall on my face.

"A football top."

It was a lie but I was testing him. If he was truly angry he would mock me but he kept quiet. I find it is best to have transparency. We are not all double agents. Jesus told it how it was. I admire his honesty in the face of corruption. Clarity is what I sought. Confusion is the enemy. As I said to my dad, if you don't understand me, then you are not on my side. Either you love me or you don't. There's no half-way house.

Because, after all, we've choices to make. Decisions to take. My mum tells me she loves me but then, when I say you've got to trust me, she stands back, to make it clear she knows better. I can read her every gesture, her lips a hard line, her eyes winding me up.

I'm sorry for their stupidity.

I'll do it my way. I'll solve the ups and downs of my life. I have never loved Marlene. That's a fact. I couldn't stand the way Marlene needed me, needed to have me about all the time, suffocating me. She would phone to tell me she was about to top herself but what did she expect me to do. I was director of operations. I had life and death decisions to make. I had a computer company to attend to. There's only room for one boss. Because when the chips are down, you need to know someone is at the helm, someone who is not afraid to act. You can't always have a safety net. Namby-pamby Health and Safety. Check this kidney. Check that liver. If a pill is as good as its word, then it's better than a politician, better than Blair. A pill never lies.

I moved in with Marlene but it was never going to be more than a temporary arrangement. Marlene had faults I couldn't overlook. Marlene would be on the sofa phoning somebody. Probably her mum. Tracking down her coat. She was always forgetting coats. There were times when I even wondered if the coats really existed. Her mum certainly existed.

We would meet in this cafe in The Royal Mile. It was some old-fashioned cafe with a girl's name. Half the time Marlene loved her mum. The other half she shouted at her. Sometimes, Marlene swore at her mum. Over the phone. In her front room. In the cafe. She ate half a bun and a piece was trapped in her teeth. She took her teeth out to find the irritation. Her mum shouted at her, saying it was not the way to behave in a public place. I can't remember if my mouth was stuck open with surprise but I definitely stopped drinking my latte. I had never seen anything like that before. My teeth are nothing to write home about. They are badly stained with all the fags I smoke but I've never had a filling and there's not many who can boast about that. The inside of Marlene's mouth was not attractive. Sometimes it is better not to know too much. Marlene stormed out.

Marlene left a coat behind on that occasion too.

I returned for the coat the next day and this tidy bird in the cafe was very understanding. She said customers left the strangest things behind in the cafe. Once she found a packet of Durex on a table. She said she didn't think they were a tip. I didn't know whether or not she was taking the piss so I just grabbed the coat from the wooden stand in the corner and hurried away. I did go back later in the day but the same girl ignored me. I didn't want to harrass her. I just sat there drinking my latte, thinking about that packet of Durex lying unopened on the table. I have tried all varieties of coffee in the hope of finding a variety that agrees with me. In truth, coffee and me are in a bit of a relationship. I try to act hard to get but the coffee always gets the better of me.

Marlene doesn't take her teeth out last thing at night. It is a fact that there is more to a relationship than teeth but that a relationship without teeth would flounder on the rocks. Marlene returned one night to the subject of her falsers. A boyfriend had punched her in the face, taking out all her front teeth. The dentist couldn't save any of them. He recommended that she have a set of false teeth and promised to make sure she got the best for the money she could afford. I have to say they looked realistic. Mind you I remember saying the same about the props in Star Wars. When I kissed Marlene, I worried that her teeth might somehow be sucked out of her mouth. That was not an encouraging thought. I learned not to kiss Marlene with any real concentration. I concentrated on other parts of her body.

But nothing stays the same. It's a law of psychics. There was too much about Marlene I couldn't get on with. I might not be able to arrange the dishes in a cupboard in any meaningful way but Marlene was confused about all of life. I remember complimenting her on the cooker in her flat. Spotless. I explained to Marlene in a caring way that it was dangerous to leave the shopping on the surface of an electric cooker. I don't know why I went up to the cooker and opened the oven door. It was full of dirty washing. There were clues that Marlene talked a better game than she played. A woman who keeps her dirty washing in an oven needs help. The problem was that Bonnington Court where she lived needed a whole ward of psychiatrists to service its needs alone. A plane coming out of the sky, a free thinker at the controls, would be doing the world a service, the carumph of the wings, breaking against the concrete, a good night's work, the buiding toppling over like a drunk man on Junction Street.

The closing round of our relationship arrived on a night when I returned to find Marlene in bed. She was surrounded by the goods she had purchased. I asked why she had bought a set of crockery. She replied that she didn't want to wash dishes ever again.

"You don't expect the Beckhams to wash dishes," she said.

At first I thought she was speaking about another family who shared the delights of our high rise hell when it clicked that she was talking about The Beckhams.

"Some of the cups are broken," I said.

"The woman at the counter pointed that out to me."

It was little wonder she found it difficult to bumble along on the streets of Leith.

I was always suspicious about where Marlene got her money. There on the bed covers was a pile of tenners.

She had ambitions in life. She had recently enrolled in a course to become a lawyer. This was after the last time she was in the Royal Ed. I never spoke my mind on the subject.

She did have a pile of books- The Law Made Easy, How to Seek out the Best Mortgage, and a great thick book borrowed from Leith Library called The Law and its Citizens - but Marlene found it difficult to concentrate. She bought a lamp from Poundstretcher and placed it on the table beside the TV and, in the evening, she would put this light on, sit on the sofa and open one of the books. Sometimes she opened all three books.

Marlene looked very studious in the beam of light but the table was quite wobbly and would raise and lower itself without warning. Some junkie must be slamming a door somewhere. The movement of the table distracted Marlene. I made her strong coffee to help her concentrate. I would watch football on TV. I paid to have all the channels on Sky and we would sit there of an evening like a proper couple, me on the sofa, drinking a bottle of beer, watching Liverpool play Juventus and Marlene studying. But half-time arrived for the studying long before half-time arrived for the football match. Marlene would disappear off to what she called "lectures" with those books in a Sainsbury's bag and return hours later with her hair wet. I thought that very strange.

You should always try to remember the first time. The first time you look across The Smoke Room at the Royal Ed. and your eyes meet. The first time you make love.

I firmly believe if you whipped off Marlene's head you would find an alien underneath, an alien at odds with the accepted procedures of our little world . Remember you sometimes go mad to save your sanity.

I had to admit that I played a part in the failure of our relationship. It turned out that I didn't do closeness, not in any regular basis . I could do a fuck but I didn't do predictability and routine and normal. My rules are not Marlene's rules and when I woke up beside Marlene that morning I realised the game was up . My underpants stank of stale sex and it came upon me that you either take what life has given you or you get out. Besides making love to Marlene gave me a nasty little rash if you get my drift. I was fumigated like a condemned building. I had never planned for being condemned.

When I was up on that roof last night my mind was a blow torch. I had the speed of Superman and the climbing skills of Spiderman. I swung my head along the panorama spread out before me, the wind whipping the clouds away and revealing the city sky above my head. The streets of Leith are not the streets of Edinburgh. In Leith trash rules. I stepped two paces to the edge of the balcony. The roughness of the stone parapet against my soft hands reminded me of how far man has fallen. Once upon a time we struggled against the elements and there was dignity in our conflict. Rain. Stone. Fire. Now we all hiding in glasshouses never daring to feel the rawness of the world.

A tree in the garden caught my eye. Oak. Birch. Beech. It was no use saying the words. It was just a tree. Not an old friend from Facebook. But it had 3 branches like arms. Like a huge fork stretching into the sky. The sky was full of stars, great gleaming light all the way from the ends of the galaxy and, as I looked at the branches, I had this vision. Three crosses from the same wood, side by side. A message for all the world to see. Two thieves and Jesus Christ all nailed up to keep the bad days away. I was never convinced about the thieves. Always thought that strange. If I was going to nail anybody up it would have been Hearts supporters , their maroon scarves flapping in the wind and Jesus would know that times were bad when one of those maroon rags blew off one of the bugger's necks and caught on his face and he couldn't wipe it away, his hands being otherwise occupied. The strands of wool up his nose, in his mouth , scratching at his soft eyes.

I should have been asked to write that bit of The Good Book. And why should this vision come to me now? Who knows what is going on in the motorways of the mind?

What I liked most about Jesus was that he spoke his mind. Always one to get pissed off. Aye, wash my feet with the best oil. Use it to cook the 3 fishes afterwards, the 3 fishes to feed the whole of Leith. Get out of my church , selling your crap gear and making money. Show respect why don't you.

Jesus had a great time when you think about it.

He led the way . A leader. He would have done a good job at Easter Road. Jesus Christ in the heart of the defence. Where he belongs. You wouldn't have to worry about that Jambo Robertson. He wouldn't have got a sniff of the goals with Jesus as centre half. Any bloke who can have a crown of thorns stuck on his head and still keep focussed is not going to worry about putting the heid in where it hurts. He would play on with both legs broken. He wouldn't be missing a World Cup because of some stupid wee broken metatarsal.

I suppose in life you are thrown together with many people you have nothing in common with. Jesus on the cross. Without by or leave, two crooks sharing the same stage with him. No choice there. Same as the Hibs defence. Never know who you'll be landed with . Could be a couple of tossers or the best buddies you would lay down your life for.

Now it was my turn to test the fickleness of time. There was a fifteen foot drop to the ledge below. I climbed on to the rim of the parapet and stood straight and strong and my hands felt the cold heat of the stars dotting the heavens. The moon, on its back, a child's drawing of the moon, was ready to cradle me in its hammock. Below me a car thumped its undercarriage on the speed bump and some kid smacked his ball against a John Lewis van. Nobody lifted their heads.

For a second the wind caught me in its hands and lifted the hairs on the back of my hands and I could tell gentle from rough. For a second I thought of ending it all but the river of life pulled me onwards. I looked at the climb ahead. My plan of escape. Once on to the neighbouring roof there was a climb along some ten houses to the bank on the corner. Drop on to the flat roof below. Drop from there to the street.

I knew what to do. Below me a ledge, solid like Saddam's concrete face. I lowered my weight on to the edge of the balcony and spun myself around until I was hanging from the mountain. Below me I knew there was a meeting place for a landing. The scrape of the rough stone against the arms of my jacket. I felt a key in my pocket hard against the wall, a rib poking out. You had to know yourself. You had to have a feel for engineering. Trust. The moment you let go in that Leith darkness. Would I ever land again or like some landslide just topple and roll, topple and roll, and land on the grass below staring up at the sky, staring up at the faces of the loved ones around me, dad, mum, Ellen, Polly, Michael? I would have the last laugh. I was in charge. The decision maker extraordinaire. My family just didn't get relationships, the dance of human intercourse, more satisfying than a fuck.

My fingers were letting go. Straightening. I was slipping free. Gravity would win the day. I let go and thump, the feet slipping, the knees aching. A crack of my cheek against the wall and rough little stones leaving a message on my right cheek. I laughed out loud in my head. I had outmanoeuvred the whole kit and caboodle. Left them high and dry. I could hear voices. An escape from the concentration camp. The imagined lights flying around, turning dark spots into clean daylight, lights flapping like bright birds of prey.

"Where in God's name is he?"

My dad was in the front garden, flustering, the bird of sense long flown away. He spoke to Donald, the new love of my mum's life. Donald smoked a fag. He was gagging for a pint. We are all creatures of habit.

"Donald, you've been here all the time. Have you seen him? I'll go upstairs. I'll sneak out on to the roof. But it's no night to be out there. I wouldn't send my worst enemy out on a night like this."

"He must be up there. He can't escape the bedroom," Donald.

"Maybe, he's climbed over the roof upwards. Maybe, he's gone over the roof. Susan has phoned the police. We need the fire brigade. He's not a bird. He can't fly. He belongs inside."

I was now on my belly, a snake, moving along the rim of the rooftops. I could see dad and Donald. Two old men outfoxed. They had moved too far from their roots, too far from the beginning of time. I was the one who knew what to do in an emergency. Even here on the edge of the roof I could hear a television play out the end credits of Eastenders. The dum-dum-dum of the closing credits belonged to me, not some fictional character in an imagined world of props where the walls are feeble and temporary. I wondered what world picture I hovered above. Were there loved ones in the nest below? Just rising from settees to put the kettle on. Two people can say so much with a cup of tea.

I had the opportunity to glimpse different worlds, to see people as they really were without the faces they put on, hurriedly, when the door was pulled open and the visitors arrived unexpectedly early.

Along I crawled. Below me more signs of ignorant panic. A police car shouting to the world and then, joy beyond joy, a fire engine. A real winner. A cup final hat-trick. A fire engine beats a police car no bother. Rock. Scissors. Paper.

I now lowered myself quietly on to the bank roof and, moments later, lowered myself on to the pavement, just missing a dog turd hiding there. I moved across the street to the dark corner opposite and was able to survey my work. A crowd was gathering. People love a good dying scene and my mum was at ease and comfortable with the disaster movie. She would be there. A wreck. Comfort in the arms of the street strangers who had their own story to tell. Pity I was dusted down and invisible, a smooth James Bond.

I looked at my knuckles, the skin peeled back. My soft hands were scuffed and two nails were bleeding. Small price to pay. I needed a fag. I even started to whistle and I never whistle but success makes fools of us all. Perhaps, it was the whistle which gave me away because when I looked backwards to the scene of my glory I spotted two old men who were pointing in my direction.

No problem. I took to my heels showing a clean pair. Ferry Road was completely ignorant of my existence. A dog walker taking time to pee at a lamppost. A car waiting to exit on to the street, window down and that old Beatles tune -

There are places I remember,  
Some have gone and some remain.”

Pulling us all somewhere different.

My legs were strong and I crossed Junction Street at a gallop. I spotted an archway, a perfect hiding place. Inside a yard of sorts, one light high up in the building. An assortment of recycling bins. I sneaked behind one. It was surprisingly cosy finding this particular corner of the universe, a spot which was basic enough to meet my needs. I smoked a quiet fag, the day's images flickering past me. I laughed inside. Being a hero takes many shapes. I heard the patter of feet in the street. Moments later my dad stood above me. That was not the image I wanted the day to end with.

“Son, you need to come with me.”

Perhaps he didn't see me after all. Just stay silent.

“This way, officer.”

My sister was directing the police towards me. What a betrayal. I will never forgive her.

My dad rested an arm on my shoulder.

“You need rest.”

An officer took over. The roughness of his uniform across my face, and he lifted me. He placed me in the back of his van. I was in a cage, a place for a mad dog. I watched my dad and my sister.

A long time ago, in a different life, we three had had fun together. At a fun fair. The lights flickering, the music loud. We had raced from one ride to another, making the most of the closing moments of an unforgettable day. And here we were, we three on a windy, wet night in Leith, at the end of another unforgettable day. Some things never change. I saw my sister shake her head and, I am sure, a tear was in her eye. I smiled but nobody took any notice. I would have shaken the bars of my cage but preferred the trick of silence.

Ward 3 would never hold me.

My dad's car pulls up. He is wearing a shirt and a pair of work trousers. I can tell by his movements that he is anxious about the situation; last night has dumped the last of his hopes. Suddenly, I am elated. I can do that. Go from the pit to the top of the mountain in the blink of an eye. My dad is there for the taking, like a centre half who has lost all confidence in his ability. He tells me we are travelling to Perthshire.

“I have found a cottage. It is most suitable, a cottage once run by the minister who ministered to the Queen.”

“You make it sound like a football team. Run by a minister.”

“You know what I mean.”

“What will we eat?” I ask.

My dad is silent. He struggles to make scrambled egg. He carries a scrap of paper in his wallet with the notes. There are ten stages to making scrambled egg.

I smile. He realises I have the upper hand. I will lead him up the garden path where once the minister to the Queen welcomed society's outcasts and healed the wounded minds of the parishioners.