

Last Man on the Moon

Someone's spewed across the grey linoleum floor of the waiting room, and a cleaner's running her mop through the yellowish puke puddle in elegant figures of eight. Her mop nudges the feet of a man dressed in a blue pinstripe suit with his head in his hands. He lifts one foot at a time, but keeps his hands pressed against the side of his head as if holding hard onto important thoughts.

He's the one I'm looking for.

I sit down next to The Suit. 'I've got something for you,' I say, putting my hand in my pocket.

'I don't do drugs,' he says.

"Do unto others as you would have had 'em undo unto you," I say.

'Do 'undo unto' what?' he says releasing his head, turning to me and screwing up his face.

'I mean, do unto others that would have you undo... them....' I hesitate all out of the right words or, if not the right words, then I've got them all arse over heels. 'Be nice to others I mean.'

The Suit sighs and lets his body slump into the chair as if he's a balloon and the air's been let out of him.

'It's out of the Bible,' I tell him.

The Suit shakes his head.

'Mum drummed it into me from an early age: be nice else the universe will shit on you,' I continue. 'Not my experience, by the way. I've got this shit-drizzle cloud been following me around since birth. Doing good deeds is a bit like using a sieve as a broolly. Saying that, some protection's better than none.'

Last Man on the Moon

‘Finished?’ he says without looking at me.

I produce a ten-pound note from my pocket. It’s one of the new ones, slippery in the palm of my hand.

‘What’s that for?’ says The Suit.

‘You.’

‘You’ve got the wrong man,’ he says.

‘You’ve seen me before?’ I say.

‘I don’t know you from Adam!’ he says.

That’s a lie because I’ve seen him a few times this month, dragging on a roll-up outside the health centre. I’ve asked him on two separate occasions for the time. He wears an old-fashioned watch with hands. A wind-up job I imagine — him and the watch.

The Suit puts both palms over his face and rubs it as if moulding a new mask for his face. He sits back with arms folded, a recovery — of sorts — from whatever’s niggling him.

‘When you opened the surgery door a gust of wind sent this tenner skidding along the pavement until it caught under the tyre of that BMX. Did you see that bike, chained to railings outside? A real beauty.’

‘You can keep the money kid. Now do one!’ he says and fixes his eyes on a display of large green digital numbers above reception. Slip the ten-pound note back into my pocket and take a moment. I don’t usually get this far in the *High Limes Health Centre*; they’ve even got a security guard to keep trouble like me out. But this time the receptionist didn’t even do the usual “Get out!” flick of her wrist as I hobbled past. She

Last Man on the Moon

was bent over the computer, explaining loudly to an old man that he could only make an appointment when he joins the surgery. Whenever I've asked to see a doctor she tells me the health centre's not taking new patients at the moment. She recommends getting myself along to Accident and Emergency on the number seventy-eight bus.

'That your BMX out there then?' I ask The Suit.

The Suit turns to me and squints like he's looking into the sun. I know it's not his bike but he's grazing me with his manner. This lad — sitting two seats from me — makes a joke about the BMX belonging to a woman in line at reception. She's wearing a black veil and carrying two huge shopping bags that she keeps putting down and picking up whenever it looks like the old man might have finished arguing with the receptionist. The lad's wearing baggy jeans with a yellow hooded top and speaks in a husky voice like he's been shouting too much at the footy. I ask him if the BMX is his. He laughs and tells me it's not. I laugh back.

I turn my attention back to The Suit. 'I used to have a BMX just like that,' I say. 'Mum bought it me second hand — a birthday present after Dad got lucky on the dogs. I won a race on that BMX.'

'Go and bother someone else,' mumbles The Suit.

'One time we rode up the woods to swing on this old tyre,' I say. 'That was a laugh until....'

'Jesus!' says The Suit. He stands up and takes a seat in the opposite row of interconnecting chairs next to a small boy and his mother. The boy's chin is caked in yellow sick so I imagine he was the one who gave the cleaner a dance with her mop. You'd think his mother would clean his face up. He watches The Suit as he selects

Last Man on the Moon

something to read from a table piled high with books and magazines. When he sits back — holding a copy of *Top Gear* over his face like a barrier between him and me — the boy steps out so he can get a proper gander at a red sports car on the front cover.

‘Yes, Squirt?’ says The Suit, lowering the magazine. A watery smile sends the boy back to his mother’s black stocking legs. Before disappearing behind his magazine, he glances up at a number two flashing silently above reception. He throws down the magazine — Nigel Clarkson’s flabby face looking surprised on the back cover — and disappears past the water-cooler and down the corridor. Only then does the receptionist call for a Mr Mitchell to go to room number two. He’s a bit twitchy. Perhaps Mr Mitchell’s got something serious like cancer.

A few moments later number three starts flashing. Three was my number in that BMX race I was in once. Third came in first. After the accident, it was a doctor with a pen behind each ear told me my leg was broken so bad I would walk with a limp for the rest of my life. When I asked about racing my BMX she shook her head and looked sad. I respect that. There’s no bullshit with a doctor. If I could just see one for a bit I could get a few things off my chest. What about if the doctor’s one of my mates from school? I know Hedge was good at maths and went to university. I liked Hedge. His hair went up in a quiff from running his hands through it when he was reading. It’s not going to happen. Something inside me really misses him. It’s a gentle pain, nothing serious.

Nobody moves in response to the flashing three or the name — which the receptionist announces as Mr Armstrong — so I sidle up to the water-cooler, trying to look inconspicuous, then walk lazily down the corridor towards room number three.

Last Man on the Moon

The name Dr Corkus is written in black letters on a rectangle of white plastic screwed into the door. I knock once and enter. Dr Corkus is bald and wearing glasses that look like they're about to slip off his nose. A gentle breeze comes through an open window, ruffling a few sheets of paper on the desk. I put my right hand in my pocket and feel for the tenner, pressing Her Majesty's face firmly against my thigh.

'I can shut the window if you're chilly,' says Dr Corkus staring at a computer screen and pressing his index finger repeatedly into the keyboard. 'It's the first really warm day we've had, isn't.' He looks up in response to my silence and pushes a pair of glasses up the bridge of his nose with the same finger. Sleeping on a bench outside a health centre you don't get to feel secure about much. I've had enough fresh air to last me a few lifetimes but for the first time in a while I do feel safe. I'm confident the doctor's got all the answers. When Doctor Corkus gets up to close the window I say: 'No!'

'No?' says the doctor.

'Yes...no.'

'Alright then, we'll let the spring air in.' He smiles and sits back in his chair.

'OK.'

'What seems to be the problem young man?'

'We'd been fooling around,' I say.

Dr Corkus leans back, stroking his chin like he's trying to pull a beard out of it.

'Please, take the weight off your feet,' he says.

I remain standing but put one hand on the back of the chair.

Last Man on the Moon

‘My mate Hedge and me was swinging on a tractor tyre over a ditch up the woods. It was a great laugh until I didn’t have enough.... what is it when you’re all out of swing?’

Dr Corkus looks out the window then turns back to me. ‘Momentum?’ he suggests.

‘Momentum,’ I repeat and feel the cold, wet rubber of the tyre slipping from my grip.

‘Go on,’ says the doctor leaning forward on his elbows.

‘Hedge was sitting on my BMX smoking a dog-end he’d stolen from my dad’s ashtray. Then I dropped like a spanner into a stinking pit of stingers.’

‘Stingers?’

‘Nettles.’

‘Spanner?’

‘Spanner,’ I say and sink into a chair next to the desk.

‘You were hurt?’

‘Leg broke,’ I say.

‘You’ve broken your leg?’ says Dr Corkus. He removes his glasses, stands up and peers down at my legs. ‘I did notice you were limping, Mr. Armstrong, but....’ Dr Corkus lowers himself back into his own swivel chair. There is short silence us until a large fly enters through the open window. It begins buzzing around the room, performing perfect figures of eight around the doctor’s head. I reckon Dr Corkus must suffer from some sort of skin condition because his bald scalp is all pock marked. It looks like the surface of the moon: scarred by billions of meteors hitting it over millions of years. What with this the

Last Man on the Moon

buzzing fly and the Mr Armstrong, I find myself thinking about the moon landings back in 1969. I know my space history because I used to read about it under my school desk in French class. That's how I know Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong were the first men on the moon.

The fly lands on the doctor's desk and I smack the palm of my hand down so hard a framed photograph of a girl wearing a brace falls off the computer monitor. She looks up at me grinning behind cracked glass. I remove the palm of my hand revealing the fly lying on its back, yellow stuff leaking out of it like custard from a tart.

'It was ... a difficult landing,' I say. Then I get up and leave Dr Corkus sitting behind his desk with his mouth open.

When I limp back into the waiting room, a man wearing a blue jumper with leather pads on the elbows comes marching towards me. He comes to a sudden halt with his right hand held up as if stopping traffic. He's wearing a badge with a photo of him not looking at the camera. His name's Michael Bibs.

'Get out of here you little shit!' he says. 'Make an appointment like everyone else if you want to see a doctor'. He grabs me by the arm and drags me towards the exit. The receptionist is waving at me so I wave back until I realise there's another fly bothering her. I wish it would come over here and puke on Michael Bibs, which is what they do to rotten stuff before they eat it, according to a book I read once called *The Joy of Knowledge*.

'If I see you again I'll do your other leg!' he says, pushes me outside and slams the surgery door behind me.

Last Man on the Moon

Something hits me on the back of my head. I think of Dad and how wide his eyes got before he punched me but it's not him because his beating days are over. It comes again, harder. Then a crack as a bony fist meets my nose. I turn away, fingers pinching a blood-gushing nose. Michael Bibs is standing behind the glass doors of the health centre nodding his head. Sharp chin stubble presses into my cheek like the bristles of brush. All I can smell are rich tea biscuits. Then a sinewy arm tightens around my neck.

'You the one nicked my BMX? The voice is high-pitched and crackling like a radio out of tune.

The Hoodie from the waiting room appears and tells him I'm the one. A chain hangs around a metal rail. The BMX has gone.

'He's got cash Armstrong,' The Hoodie says.

The lad with *Rich Tea* Biscuit breath and a brush bristle chin must be the same Armstrong I took the place of in the surgery. The Hoodie pulls the tenner from my pocket and Armstrong releases my head. I begin staggering around desperate to control my stumbling legs and determined not to fall. Then I remember the cleaner's mop cutting elegantly through the yellow puke and the fly returning for another orbit of the doctor's head in loops of eight. I try to follow the smooth, looping pattern of a number eight. Even my gammy leg feels strong as I stagger-dance and spin across the cracked, shit stained concrete.

'What's he doing?' says Armstrong.

I stop at that intersection, dead centre of a figure eight — a sort of crossroads. I turn to both of them — a little giddy on the eights. 'Eight cut in half makes two threes, yes?' I say.

Last Man on the Moon

‘Shut up prick!’ says The Hoodie.

‘Means half eight's three, right?’ I say.

‘Half eight’s four shit for brains!’ Armstrong says and steps forward scowling — a distortion of his gob more confused than angry and then he punches me one again in the nose.

#

Taste in my mouth like sucking bullets. Dr Corkus’ moon head comes into focus above me. When I smile, blood on my face tightens, resisting the grin. That’s what babies do to all new faces: smile, just in case the face belongs to someone who’s going to pulverise it with a rock. You gotta be fake from the start to survive in this world.

The doctor’s forehead creases as he draws closer.

‘I’m the Lunar Module Pilot’ I gurgle when I speak. The words mixed up with blood and spit.

Dr Corkus steps back. ‘How long was he unconscious?’ he asks.

Michael Bibs comes into the picture like junk caught in the moon’s orbit. He shakes his head and stares down at me with dead eyes. I remember lying on my back looking up at the spinning tyre above me, a shard of bone coming out my thigh like a bloodstained, prehistoric knife. I wonder if the fly had a similar moment: looking up at us, its compound eyes half blinded by the contents of its guts.

Doctor Corkus offers me his hand but I roll away. Back in the day — before the accident — I would spring from sitting to standing in one move. Now I have the same feeling, as if I’ve been sprung. I’m up on my feet and bouncing from one leg to the other like a boxer before a bout. No pain in my gammy leg. Both legs a couple of

Last Man on the Moon

number threes working together. Together they're strong. Together they're eight. Eight — according to this beardy bloke I met once, stinking of piss and scratching a figure eight into gutter dirt with a dried up frog's leg outside a church — means eternity. Some bollocks like that.

As I stand on the curb, waiting to cross the road, I remember Mum telling me she'd see me later for a fish supper. She didn't see me later because two years ago I left home, tired of Dad's drunken beatings. Now Dad's dead, she lives alone. I never went to his funeral. Never looked back — wasn't there someone from the Bible who turned into a pile of salt because they looked back? I wandered into a church once by mistake, to take shelter from a storm, and someone closed the door on me. Then the vicar told us that story. I guess it was his sing-song voice in my head these last two years, living in hostels and sleeping on benches, warning me not to look back.

A black BMW stops next to me and The Suit gets out with a hand in his pocket like he's gonna pull a gun.

'I've got something for you,' he says. There's a long pause and he's not smiling.

Perhaps I should scarper on my brand new leg. Take it for a run. The thought makes me smile. The Suit smiles back.

'How should I say?' says The Suit. 'The world was dark and now it's light.' He pulls a wad of twenties from the inside pocket of his jacket and presses the notes into my hand. 'Don't spend all of it on booze.'

I think he's the first really happy person — not drunk — I've ever met. 'No chance,' I say.

Last Man on the Moon

He follows a white handkerchief from his pocket and gives it me. I wipe away some of the blood from my nose and mouth.

‘Can you give me a lift?’ I say.

‘Where you going?’

I give him Mum’s address and sink into the soft brown leather of his car. In a thin layer of condensation, formed by my breath on the window, I draw the figure eight. I strike a line through it then wind down the window. Cool breeze on my face as we sweep up the road towards my old house, past the corner shop where Hedge and I used to nick booze and cigarettes; past the bus stop where we used to shelter on wet days; past Mum walking up the road. I tell The Suit to pull over on the other side of the road and watch her in the side mirror. She’s got a new hairstyle, shorter and dyed conker-brown. Her expression’s not worn out, as I expected, but soft and determined. Mum crosses the road and walks towards an older man in a baseball cap on the other side. He jogs the other way then spins around laughing. ‘Come on then!’ he says and pulls her off her feet. He closes his eyes when he hugs her.

‘This it?’ asks The Suit.

‘No,’ I say, ‘keep going Mr Mitchell.’

‘I don’t do misters,’ he says. ‘Call me Des.’ Des puts his foot down, smooth acceleration past my old school then past the Hoodie riding Armstrong’s BMX on the opposite side of the road.

‘Stop!’ I say.

Des pulls the car over. I select a couple of fifties from the wad of money he gave me earlier. I won’t say this is gonna be easy. I’m so close to twatting that muppet on the

Last Man on the Moon

bike. Let's not over do this — I put one fifty-pound note back. Look up into the blue sky. There's not a shit drizzle cloud in sight. I remember Hedge told me once — and since the moon's been on my mind it's worth a mention — the last man on the moon you can still see his footprints in the lunar dust because there's no wind up there or nothing to disturb them. Everything's the way it was. If you want to change things, you need to get up there and ride a BMX about or something. Kick around the dust.

'What you doing?' asks Des.

'I'm gonna buy a bike,' I say.