

To Whom It May Concern

Are you there?

Are you listening?

I shan't wait for a response lest my life come to its natural conclusion, so let me begin.

I have never been one to plead — would my creaking knees allow it I would be upon them, but all this ailing body will allow is the tremulous clasp of these gnarled knuckles as I appeal to your mercy.

I am sick.

I am in pain.

I am dying.

Yes, my body is finding new ways to falter and forsake me daily: my lungs could lead a band of Scottish pipers in a *malodious* overture and my heart could take the percussionists of this soporific symphony through their paces. These are the battles of flesh, skirmishes within this withered skin fought and won each day anew, but I am losing the war without.

This brave new world is like my father brandishing his belt buckle and at my age bruises do not heal.

Violence singses my fingertips in every newspaper yet the tolerance for it is insidious.

Electronic screams and death-cries cloud the mid-morning bus the three stops to the market I can no longer muster — it seems every other week is a school holiday these days. A discarded drink can rattles along the floor in a clanging dance under the seats. I'm left to stand more often than not as bags trump bums and all eyes are down and out of this reality into that virtual rectangle of a pocket computer. I imagine all those pings and blips as strings and strips of wire. I see puppets pulled along by one grand, unseen master. I long to cut those cords and shout, 'BE FREE! SEE THE WORLD WITH YOUR EYES!' but only utter my customary, 'Thank you, Driver,' as I push through an inertia of adolescence.

I arrive at the market unscathed but enraged. Each trip chips away at my faith in humanity, that I still may have a place on the Ark, but I'm hog-tied and blindfolded walking the plank to my decrepit doom. The straits of Tuonela teem below, a seething skin of blue and broiling rune; of Minch riddle and Siren tune set to the tongue-twisting cadence of additives adorning aisle after aisle of ready-made malignance. I have no couplet for dimethylpolysiloxane ergo this crinkled carcass is pitched overboard. The horrors of consumption wreath my swan dive in uncountable E-numbers of endless syllables. Invisible arms and unexpected items in the bagging area drag me down, down, down and eject me out the other side, overshooting my mark in the Underworld. I emerge, still unscathed but more enraged, clutching a plastic-strangled sack of satsumas and the shreds of my sanity.

Are you there?

Are you taking note?

Then let me continue.

I'm drowning.

I hunger for air.

The pipers in my chest conclude their prelude as the string section stings a sonata in my throat.

I cower behind my curtains. I double-lock my door and triple check it. My trips to the market become more and more infrequent and I can finally thank my brittle body for needing less and less nourishment. At least that's what I choose to believe.

I don't feel hunger. I'd survived on tinned sardines and bread from the freezer until my niece started visiting once a week after an impromptu visit which had her scowling in the barren cupboards. I can still hear the howl of her tuts echoing around the tundra of the refrigerator. At least half of the food she brings me ends up as the foxes' midnight feast, but that will be our little secret, ok? I'm already a big enough burden which is why I parlay my plea:

Take me away.

Away from the pain.

Away from the fear.

I am afraid. No — I'm terrified.

The stairs are becoming steeper and I'm becoming slower. I am becoming undone and it is unbecoming. Take me away while I still have my wit and my wits about me.

Though this feeble frame of an octogenarian may induce pity, you'd better believe that the gal inside is still spry which is why I want to die before my body melts like butter in a skillet.

DIGNITATIS MORTEM!

I am not afraid of death. I welcome it.

My heart strums an adagio.

I sleep in peace when I wander to that sweet forever after but too soon I am awakened by a brass band ousting the pipers with a honking scherzo worthy of a gaggle of feathered friends and I'm shamefully reminded of my muscular laxity.

This is my fear: frailty beyond imagining; total loss of independence — adult diapers.

Please kill me now.

Are you there?

Are you reading this?

Then let me conclude my case.

The world has moved on and there are those of us who have been left behind. Adapt or die. I have evidently failed the former so I request the latter. It's time to get off this ride. Besides, it's not a ride I recognise any more. The thrill is gone. No more rickety rollercoaster, all eye-goggles and straps and safety precautions. No fear of flying out. No fear... but no flying.

All the corners have been cut. All the hard work done. All tradition gone. Compassion usurped by indifference. Respect a currency no longer in circulation.

The world is sick.

The world is in pain.

My world has died.

I am here.

I am coming.

Two hours or less.

Hoops jumped, red tape navigated, all personal matters tied up in neat little bows. A short flight, a splash of gin, my brave niece wiping a rogue tear from her chin.

Even I was surprised by my complete lack of hesitation — I knocked back that cocktail like I was 25 again. A rousing allegro of Great Balls of Fire resounds in my internal orchestra. This is my swan song, my fond farewell, and I did it my way.

My only regret was this final journey, to not meet you on home turf.

If you're there.

Are you there?

Maybe it's you tickling my toes, maybe it's the Phenobarbital.

I'm tired. Tired of this world. Tired of trying to keep up. Tired of being dragged along like a lame mutt.

I think my eyes have closed but I see colours I can't name and my ears unveil a new overture. I abandon myself to its unbridled voracity.

I am done...

I am gone...

...

...

...

...There you are.