

Written by a former client about his father

One More Taster

In loving memory of my dad who now floats free at sea

(1949 -2004)

I watch him dozing in his big wooden bed that surrounds him and holds him down as I sit on the floor beneath the arched window that is injecting crisp rays of November sun across the room. The air is brown and detestable.

He looks like a small boy that is trapped between birth and death, gasping for every dreaming breath, tortured by slumber thoughts that send rapid convulsions up his torso and spine. I wish I could take it all away.

He does not know I am here nor cares, as he opens his eyes to find the place that he longs to be away from is still all around him in sickening colour and light. And the dog, who loves him dearly is also here and has jumped aboard his sinking ship to sniff and arouse him.

I stand and move towards him, alerted by a mumble and a shift of his foot; he does not see me through his glass eyes of muddy brown that are hidden behind the sag of his jaundiced lids. The blue bedside table top looks like a sea bed beneath a pool of green wine, and fag ends float atop like abandoned men, some have drifted over the fountain edge and onto the floor, engrained into the carpet by frustrated feet.

The white bedsheet is tightly wrapped around his tiny frame, reminding me of Gandhi; his thin little brown arms poke out of the sides and flop over onto the floor and his knuckles bathe amongst the cigarette remains in a puddle of booze.

I despise what I see yet I love the man who is the creator of such filth and muck. The room feels as though it does not belong in this world that rustles and slides outside; In here there is an awful and

senseless demonic pain whereas out there everything moves in a natural progression of ordered yet chaotic growth and time.

Nature is my enemy today. The grass can rise and the birds can whistle but they should help in here if they are to be considered a Force. Could the glorious powers of the world possibly solve this wreckage and squalor? Can Mother Nature in her rose patterned pinnie kindly lend a hand to two men fighting the stench and the hellfire indoors.

The room is hot, it is melting; urine and stale liquor burns my nostrils as I breath`.

I think back to a time when he was strong and proud and would carry me on top of his head like a trophy. I remember out of a deep corner, the time when I was four and he had pushed a great passenger ferry from off my infant foot just before it could crush my tiny bones into crumbs between steel and stone. What words are there for a hero that have not been said before? ... Words that capture and hold him in place in my mind. Why can I not put form to my feeling without borrowing the sentiments of others? I try.

Black congealed blood has become entangled in his beard, so I rinse out a towel corner and rub with force at the mess on his chin. He is oblivious to my attention yet peers up and smiles as a child may smile at a mother who is giving a feed.

I remove five, six... eight empty bottles of Spanish Medium White from beside the bed and carry them through to the kitchen. The black bin liner is crammed full with previous bottles, so I open a new one; as I do this I hear a cry from the bedroom, he is calling out for me, his wife, anybody to help. I fully accept that it is not me that he wants, he cares not for a soothing voice or a loving hug; I would become currency for his desire at a moments choice and that is fine.

"More booze, please, oh God ... help me! I can't take this, your all so fucking cruel!"

He is wide awake and I am small once more. My love struggles to fight his pain.

It has been decided that he must withdraw off it; after ten days without food his body will start to breakdown and he is dehydrated. I must forsake my urges to surrender to him as the time we have seen coming for a while may soon arrive. The inevitable and uncompromising ending.

I had seen the signs: the complete lack of interest in the Test match, the unnecessary snapping at the children, the strange distant look and the droopy bottom lip after two pints of Fosters that night in the pub when I thought it might be safe to just pop out for a `couple'.

The selfish truth is that I have needed him, as a man. I have liked him as a man more than any other man. He is always genuine and he never talks just for the sake of it. He has made me laugh more than anybody else has or ever will. He sees the things that I don't see and wish that I could. When he is in good spirits he makes everyone around him feel good. He would die for his children, although I doubt that what is happening now is really for us. When I got attacked one New Years Eve and lost four teeth, he was there, stroking my hair as he sat on the toilet seat and I lay, sobbing in the bath.

To me, he is above all of the trivial frustrations and insecurities that have entered my adult life.

"Don't worry son" he would say "everything will be alright".

It usually was for me, nothing serious, but for him, losing the desire to live. It could not be any worse.

I am selfish because I have gone with him to the pub and drunk We have drank and talked and laughed and he has understood me more than anyone could, more than myself. It is intoxicating, a drug... when someone you love can look you in the eyes and show you all of the unanswered questions.

This last time, I knew he was due for a session and I still went. He would have started regardless so I do not punish myself too severely. He had only had three, but that was enough. There are no rules or safety guidelines with this, that is just how it goes.

"He can't take anymore of these sessions."

"I know, what do we do?"

"I don't know."

'I don't know', it said it all, we most certainly didn't. He is the enigma of our lives. A few months before, he had been sectioned for twenty eight days and taken away.

When we arrived to visit him the same day, he was being batted about between patients like a rubber ball and was becoming very distressed as although sober, he was suffering from a form of psychosis that rendered him helpless to people who could manipulate and cajole him. I also discovered that he had had his cigarettes stolen and had been left outside in a wheelchair, in the rain.

The anger inside me erupted and I confronted three of the nurses.

"What the bloody hell do you think: you're doing with him? He'll be safer at home than in here, come on, we're taking him home."

Of course we couldn't have done so, it was his only hope and I had to calm down before I ended up being admitted myself.

After a couple of days medication, clarity returned into his sparkling eyes and the demons were banished as he started to talk about getting his strength back and rejoining the 'Life Club', of returning to his role in the family. He asked about the last few days and that he could not remember arriving and I revelled in informing him that I had been his hero that first night by preserving his dignity. He disappointed me by not looking impressed. I shaved off his beard, dropping the years onto the floor.

He came home, to start again. He was never going back there. We were sorry. He looked like he cared.

The strength sapping argument begins as I tell him that there is no way I am going to let him have anymore, he will die, I am sure of it. I tell him that I have tablets to help him sleep ... an unconscious state is the real destination that he desires. Or so I think. He demands in his cracked voice_ for more

booze and I waver in contemplation that seems to freeze time. There is no existence of time, it is irrelevant in this room.

The decision to deprive him of his urge has never felt comfortable for me, it has felt cruel and detached. He would plead and beg and I often gave in, having a `glass' myself to toast the most absurd occasion imaginable. I would sip the warm wine so as to reach down to him, to get close, to be with him. We would drink in the piss and vomit and he would come alive, he would rise from out of his misery. I was now his buddy again and not one of the others who always takes it away.

The stories would start, day or night, usually rude, both pissed. He had been quite a lad in his day and I loved it, I was proud. Any girl he wanted, or so the wine would say.

He would talk of how he ended up in such a state; his parents were in the trade, always working, always fighting ... he had been spoilt with gifts, a pony instead of a cowboy costume, but neglected in terms of love and attention. As a small boy he would piss on the fire so as to make the room smell for his parents when they got home.

I would tell him that he was probably just born fucked up, a wiring not quite right and he would nod and say "maybe" and gulp at his glass with ferocious intensity as though it contained the elixir of life.

I was the only one who understood, he would say, maybe he saw himself in me. A frustrated male, struggling to find sense and purpose, an adequate mode of expression, a young man that if he is not careful could end up in a bed, living to drink.

He had been only twenty one when his mother had died and he was left alone to arrange the funeral while his father chose to ignore the situation and continue his affair with a waitress that worked for him. The same woman gradually became ingrained into our family and is now referred to as `Auntie' by all of the grandchildren. Out of respect and loyalty to him, I have chosen not to.

The solution to all of the pain lay in intoxication and by twenty three, he was regularly disappearing for weeks on end, booking into hotels so as not to be found. The bingeing cycle could not be broken by himself and his concerned father would have him admitted into various institutions to try and cure him.

My mother met him in the mid- seventies in a Psychiatric hospital at which she worked;

"He was scruffy, emaciated and talking incoherently, but somehow three weeks after leaving, he returned with a bunch of flowers, stepping out of his smart M.G, with a cheeky smile and he brushed me off my feet ... of course I had to be careful not to jeopardise my job, but by then I didn't care."

She used to tell me what a great dad he was when I was a baby, getting up in the night, every night to put the kettle on, always insisting on doing the bathing and many of the jobs dad's just don't want to do... "He was perfect if only it hadn't been for his..."

I fumble through the over loaded dishwasher to find a glass and fill it halfway with water. The tablets will make him sleep and the longer he is asleep the easier it will be for us to bring him off the drink and the less painful it will be for him as he withdraws.

Before I have a chance to put forward my proposition to him, the doorbell rings and it is the doctor, who I know will suddenly receive a very humble and kindly response from the patient. It is just me he hates right now.

"Robert, can you hear me?" "Yes, hello

Joe"

"How are you feeling Rob?" "Felt better"

I look around the room, intensely irritated by his sudden ability to articulate and embarrassed of my own shame at the sweeping smells that waft around as I try to open the paint encrusted window to let in a bit of air.

I have lived this scene over many times during the last five years. It is always when my step-mother is at work, she is a nurse and a born carer, a wonderful person. Thank-god for her as she has kept him alive and we have become very close in our joint quest.

I become very tense as I start to sense that there may be very little the doctor can do. He has to consent to go into hospital, unless he were to be unconscious and then the paramedics could take him away, but he is not and once again I make the joke about hitting him over the head with a frying pan and like before, the doctor does not laugh.

The doctor repeats that he would certainly advise hospital, and now I want to attack him with the frying pan for taking us back round in a circle. I have always had an intense fear of speaking out of turn to people in authority to the point where I become very inhibited. I should be contributing more to the solution, but instead I swing from the door frame, wishing I had changed the soiled sheets and imagine what the doctor must think of the squalid scene,... `lovely house, nice car outside, neglectful son.'

The doctor tells me to keep giving him milk and Vitamin B tablets and that if he were to start bringing up blood to phone for an ambulance as it is unlikely they would listen to his protests. They have before, but what can I say?

The doctor is gone and he has now latched on to the threat and torture of hospital. He will escape, he has done it before and he will again. He was once locked in an upstairs bedroom by my mother and he had jumped out of the window shattering every bone in his left foot and ankle; remarkably, he still managed to get to his car and swerve all the way to the shop and back to buy his vodka or whatever it was he wanted at the time.

"Please my boy, don't make me go, I've had enough, you understand, I know you do. I want to die, that's all ...I just want to drift away nice and quiet, no fuss."

I tell him I don't want him to die, that I love him, that he could be happy if he stopped drinking, went back to AA, reclaimed his life, became a Buddhist, took up pot ... anything, to stop this. I remind him of his family, of his duty, his commitments.

He shouts at me to `shut up!, shut up!, shut up!'.

A kindly Spanish Psychiatrist told me once, that it really is the individuals right to die, if that is what he chooses.

No it is not! There are more of us than him and we will lose out, we will grieve. He wants to escape, to be at peace ... well what about our peace? He could quit the booze and live in terrible anxiety and depression but we would be happy with him here, and there are more of us than him.

We cannot actively let him die, what would the neighbours say? We want him here, sometimes perky when sober. I want him here so I can strive to get closer, to finally feel that the gaps are all filled, to be older with him.

He does not want to be here, he tells me all the time of late. When he is 'well', he is not 'well' or happy. Death will be a relief. Life offers nothing but irritation and craving.

One even hotter and insensible time a few months ago I became convinced that I must help him escape. I took a pillow from by the side of his head and hovered over his shrivelled sleeping frame; I reached down, looking at his tired and ancient face and stopped. A murderer's soul driven by compassion yet restrained by sense and learnt morals; except I do not possess a murderers soul, I could not kill a spider or a wasp so the notion of killing a parent is impossible. Yet, is it murder to relieve someone you love of their suffering? I will never know.

We are alone, all alone, but not together. He is lost down his endless hole, gibbering words that he has trained himself to say when threatened by sobriety or hospitalisation. He is a father, a husband and a son and these are the only personnae can act out. He has never liked who he is because he has never known himself and all that remains is a man tortured by his own workings and functions.

I hoist him up effortlessly and adopt the 'stern' approach, he momentarily submits and I force three Librium into his mouth, he gulps the water I give him and as I move away he kisses my hand. My love for him hurts so deeply.

The sun outside is rising in the sky, it is a beautiful day and for ten minutes the contained insanity within the room seems to subside. He asks me about college and says that he knew I would land on my

feet. I tell him that I am yet to land and he looks at me curiously as he always does when I say something pretentious.

He dozes off and I imagine that somewhere nearby an alcoholic will be slumped in his or her bed or sneaking a 'snifter' from behind the washing machine, somewhere nearby an alcoholic is taking their toddler to crèche and planning their mid-morning drink and somewhere close, a couple will surrender their obligations and drag their kids to a pub garden, forcing a bottle of Pepsi and a packet of Monster Munch under their noses, while they happily spend the next thirteen hours getting wasted while the children become tired, irritable and bored and not in any fit state to develop as children should.

I try not to be judgmental, but I am. How dare these people inflict their own sorry states on the unblemished. We were lucky. Then he neglected me the one time. We were gone.

He was in AA for eight years and had reached the point where he would be on call at night to go out and help someone who has fallen off. He seemed happy and successful in his work, he had a boat on the Marina and would sit in the sun like a plucky captain, grinning from ear to ear with his mug of tea; then one Christmas he decided he was Ok. He missed the 'social side' even though it had never been about the 'social side', he missed the 'lads', what 'lads'? He bought four bottles of Bud and smiled at us while we all collectively died inside.

He chose to drink over us. My younger sister screamed for a whole week, reliving the times that existed so long ago eight years before. Holidays had been enjoyed. Summer barbecues and school play's filled the family album. The comfortable presence of him was being threatened by an enemy that we had long forgotten. I stayed calm and optimistic, suppressing my panic with utterances of acceptance.

Within two months, he was on a life support machine and I wondered just how much of this he could have avoided.

Bad dad.

I have never thought that.

I am broken, the tablets have worn off and he is now ten hours since a drink. I cannot calm him, he is sobbing. I give in.

I fumble through his pockets and get a 'tenner'. There is no way I will ever fund his habit, though that is not true as I have before and I would again.

I slam the front door and enter this new world of familiar noises and smells, I will not adjust to this bright reality today, I can't, it is alien to me. I resent all existence that is in natural motion, cars that pass then turn left just as they are supposed to, the number plate that appears exactly as it should, the wind that gusts right on cue after six seconds, the predictable lawnmower and dog bark of three roads east.

I enter the off licence, it is twenty to twelve and I am to buy three bottles of cheap white wine for £9.98. I loathe myself for caring what the man behind the counter is thinking... Who gives a damn if he thinks I am a drunkard! after all I do have a tendency to over do it, so he's not far off. I want to tell him the situation at home, he will understand, he won't care but he will understand. I want some sort of forced sympathy that is not sincere or genuine, it would feel better than the real sort that can make you squirm and crawl around inside.

I remain sullen and quiet.

I open the front door and the smell's of car oil and grass and Lenor are replaced by a stench that makes me gag. It has spread throughout the bungalow and I spray an aerosol feverishly in every room and accidentally into the dog's eyes. The smell is now much worse.

He has been sick again and I see traces of blood and stomach lining.

He is awake and smiling as he sees what I have in my hand. I will let him have a last taster as it is what he wants and I love him too much to say no.

Later he will go to hospital, once he is unconscious and I have 'back up'.

But for now, I open the bottle, pour out two glasses and feel warm again. One more taster by his side.

THE END