

Extract 2: On the subject of unemployment

Time passes quickly when you don't have a job. The first week, there is an element of novelty. Even the paltry 3 weeks for which I had held down a job felt, in retrospect, like an eternity. After the first week, though, it becomes hard to peer back through the ever darkening shrouds of history to envisage a time when you actually had to get out of bed in the morning.

So, I'm lying in bed, the wind softly rustling the slightly grubby net curtains, casting strange shadows on the ceiling. Or was it the walls? Hmm well, the shadows probably affected both. The ceiling is probably a far more logical place for me to have been looking, given my state of repose at the time. Wherever the shadows fell would certainly have corresponded with where I was staring. Which, on reflection, was most probably the wall. The sun, you see, was high in the sky by this point.

My room at home was big, and it contained strange corners where long lost treasures might be found, from my two decades of existence. I thought that it might be rather a nice way to spend the day, investigating the nooks and crannies that lay around and about, revisiting childhood memories and such like. But then that would be more broody than I was accustomed to. I had more important things to attend to.

At such a stage of the day I had no need to shower, or dress. I felt that having something to eat might be a good idea, although I was reasonably sure it was long past the time when breakfast was practical. Eating had, though, assumed a priority for me. In between thinking about what to eat, preparing something to eat, eating, and watching bargain hunt, I had discovered there was little time to cram any other activities into my days. This seemed to me to be rather a strange state of affairs, although in truth it was no different to the activities of our primeval ancestors. I had evolved though.

I threw on some shorts and a scruffy kind of a T-shirt, and crept down the stairs towards the kitchen. I say crept, because in spite of my entirely justified sense of self-righteousness regarding the hour of the day at which I had got out of bed, I was deep down slightly ashamed. I didn't want my Dad to see me like this. It's a guy thing.

My Pa, you see, had always worked hard. He'd had about one day off in his entire working life, and that was because he was trapped in a collapsed building and was physically unable to get to work until the fire brigade managed to free him. Technically I suppose, even then he could say he'd stayed late the day previous. I'm not sure what he really makes of my work ethic. I could guess. I think he must be bemused, and probably a little ashamed. Bemusement he does well. A stare, a shake of the head, and a roll of the eyes if he can be bothered. The sight of me getting up at this hour would elicit this response. In my mind, it would be accompanied by the thought in his mind 'there's no way this boy could have come from my loins'. Fair enough, I say. I was born to tread a different path.

My fear, or should I say, mild concern, proved unfounded. He was no-where to be seen, probably on a job. I was equally if not more concerned that I shouldn't run into my mum. This was for rather different but equally valid reasons. She didn't mind what I did really, because she had higher issues to contend with. Her muse, her projects, the ethereal waste of her mortal toilings. Well, the point is if I bumped into her I'd have to listen to all that crap. Whilst I shared her love of the duvet, my artistry was generally confined to the pub environment, most specifically the consumption of alcohol and the beguilement of the simpler sex. An encounter with her this morning (or this afternoon, whatever) would most likely delay my consumption of cheese on toast.

Now, you amateur psychologists will already be looking and my relationship with my mother and stroking your chins. You are probably right to do so. To you I must seem shaped by the singular lack of affection and care from my folks that I appear to have not only taken for granted but reciprocated. You're probably right.

I can't deny that my mother is a spectacular figure, especially when viewed from the front. Her advancing years fail to hide her striking beauty, and neither does the thin robe that she is accustomed to barely wearing about the house.

By this time I had long since ceased to be embarrassed by this type of spectacle. As a teenage lad I was loath to invite my friends to visit lest my mother become transformed into a figure of fun, or still worse, of fantasy. That was something that happened anyway, of course. When she picked me up from school, or from football practice, everyone got an eyeful anyway. The few of my closest mates who did come round were routinely treated to displays that left them with their mouths wide open, their eyes gaping, dribble glistening on their chins. Eventually I learned not to care, it was just another bizarre part of my existence. I didn't really see my mum often enough for it to become a huge problem at home, and in a way it gave me some aura, kudos, dare I say it pulling power.

She spent a lot of her time closed in her own world, reproducing whatever it was going through her brain on canvas, locked in her studio. Or the spare room as it used to be. My mother eventually annexed the spare room because she felt it would empower her artistic impulses. I was upset at the time only because it was a large room, which would have been ideal for a train set. I didn't realise how much it would isolate her from us. I'm still not sure how my Dad felt about that. Thing is she hadn't been able to recapture the success of her youth, when she had exhibitions every week and was rarely out of the local paper. She had become increasingly introverted, and her impressionist images of god knows what attracted only the occasional ageing admirer, knocking on the door to pick them up for a song. Fortunately everything in the house had already been paid for.

Interesting, eh? Maybe that explains my attitude towards women and work. Fascinating. Thing is, my home and family are the only home and family I've ever known, this IS normal for me. What's normal for you seems strange and alien to me, but in it's own way has made you what you are. Is that better or worse? Think about it.

Anyway, no-one was around so I bounded down the hallway to the kitchen, pounced upon the fridge. There it was, just where I left it, a lovely block of medium cheddar. Lovely. Sometimes your whole life can seem complete in the face of laughably simple pleasures. I find simple pleasures anywhere. None are so simple or so joyous as taking that block of cheese, cutting it into slices, then melting it under a grill upon some freshly toasted bread. Cheese on toast is not presumptuous; it wants nothing in return. It's not going to cause you any strange growths or diseases, aside from the inevitable heart failure that comes from consistently consuming a product that is at least 60% saturated fat. It won't leave you, and if it does, if it leaps from the plate in an act of fromagial suicide, you can go and make some more. It's cheap. You can have it alone or with friends. Happiness is cheese on toast.

Of course one day the cheese will run out. It's inevitable. All good things are destroyed somehow. Sometimes even my own sacred moments, alone with the cheese and the toast, become imperfect as some other wretched facet of existence intrudes upon them.

For now, I prefer not to think of that. So I ask you to picture the scene. I lie, slumped in front of the television. My legs are spread as wide as possible, next to me is the precious plate of joy. One arm is draped across the back of the couch, the other raises the cheese on toast to my mouth, heavy rivulets of grease easing down my fingers. I am watching ski-jumping on Eurosport, for some reason. Having this quiet time, I can focus upon the joy that is my lunch. Being sacked though, has drawn me into a different and less sanguine world. With a deep underlying sense of bitterness I think of Sheila and her horrifying smugness, I think of the effect it has had on me, I reflect that it has left me with absolutely nothing to do. Apart from watching the ski-jumping on Eurosport of course. I indulge in happy but tense daydreams which involve my hands clasped around her awful, ignorant throat, I hear her cries for mercy. I smile.

Another tiny Japanese man flies through the air with skis attached to his feet. It's a sport that you would expect the Japanese to be good at. Partly because they naturally have the composure, elegance and reflexes to master the demanding art of flying through the air on skis, partly because they have a large quantity of enormous snowy peaks to practice on. Mainly because you have to be

totally insane to throw yourself from the side of a mountain onto a sheet of ice whilst wearing 6ft fibreglass shoes. Unfortunately, once the spectator actually accepts the reality of such a feat, the sport is interminably dull to watch. The seemingly likely spectacle of competitors cart-wheeling through the air and landing on their heads in an explosion of twisted limbs and broken bone, followed swiftly by a public service announcement and a change of programming, soon dwindles as the professionalism of the athletes becomes clear. I lament the new shiny age of professionalism. I lament the departure from the sport of Eddie the Eagle, the mad bastard*. I wonder how the hell they are ski jumping in July. The 'oh my god, I can't believe they're doing that' factor wears off swiftly, and my free hand twitches for the cable remote within a minute.

I change the channel. Britney Spears, or at least someone who looks very much like her, is shaking her ass all over the screen. Wonderful though the visual is, the music is so bad that it only sustains my attention for another 10 seconds before I start flipping again. Woodworking appears on the screen, however my interest in American men with beards and power tools is limited. The hypnotic appeal of the sander spitting streams of sawdust holds me for a mere 5 seconds before the buzzing noise is cut off with a further deft stoke of my finger. UK Gold is showing ancient episodes of 'The Bill' which appears on screen for a brief 2 second hiatus before I give up and change back to BBC1 to check if the local news has finished yet. I am rewarded with the opening sequence to 'Diagnosis Murder' with Dick van Dyke and Barry van Dyke. Defeated, I discard the remote and refocus upon the remainder of the cheese on toast. Challenge upon challenge.

"Harry? Harry!"

The cheese on toast is halted on its journey to my mouth, my lips prematurely parted to receive the wanton bounty. My mother bursts into the room.

"What is it ma, can't you see I'm watching... erm... this."

"Come through to the studio, hun – I want you to be the first to see this."

I get up slowly, clutching the congealing slice of a now distant Valhalla.

She was wearing scarcely anything as usual of course. Today the gown was white, practically see-through, beneath it her ample bosoms had free and spectacular reign. I got up and followed her as she swept dramatically out of the room, a little curious at what I would find in the spare room this time. It normally contained a vast army of easels in assorted postures, broken and blotched canvasses scattered all over the sheets that covered the floor. The window would be open and the room generally freezing – painted fingerprints would be upon the pane and the edges of the doorframe. It was chaos, even by my standards. Normally the effect of walking into the room was akin to that of a trans-dimensional vortex when considering the relative normality that pervaded the rest of the house.

I caught her up as she reached the top of the stairs.

"Harry, darling, this is my new work. I wanted you to be the first to see it because you've inspired it in a way"

She pushed open the door. As it swung open I was assailed by a rash of colour. Vast murals adorned the walls, the ceiling, the piano that for some reason stood in the corner, bequeathed by a long forgotten pianist. The easels stood more uniformly than usual, arranged in ranks in the middle of the room. The canvases upon them, and those laid about, were all blank.

"This is it... I call it the Studio"

"Wow, mum, that's really something"

I was being serious. I wasn't sure what it meant, or even if it meant anything, but the overall effect was remarkable. I had to get out.

“My darling you inspired me with your persistence in following your own path, in making your own way. You are the blank canvases, the world painted around you.”

That truly was the sort of thing only a mother could say to their own child, whom they have weaned and nurtured.

“It’s amazing mum.”

She turned away and retreated to a corner of the room, without any further words. I mumbled something inconsequential and backed away, shutting the door on the scene where I could. Then I turned and marched back down the stairs to sit back down in front of the TV. Dick van Dyke was doing a little dance. The cheese on toast went stale in my hand.