

Anything Else

Fuck it.

'A bottle of Lagavulin.' Go on. You know you want to. 'And twenty Benson and Hedges please, Annie.'

'I didn't know you smoked,' Annie says, lifting a grey plastic flap that conceals the packs from view. Used to be a colourful backdrop to the counter. A cornucopia of colours vying for the customers' attention. Buy me! No! Me! Now, a grey wall of little plastic flaps. Like a wall of drawers of a miniature morgue. Fucking depressing.

'Now and then.' He runs his eyes over her body as she is half turned. Not bad for her age. Must be pushing fifty but...

'Special occasions?'

'Sometimes.'

As she scans the packet, he imagines her naked, her dark wavy hair dishevelled, flowing over her heavy breasts, lips pursed as she leans in for a kiss...

'Special day?' And she's gone. She drops the packet into his bag.

'Eh? No, no.' Can't be arsed with this today. 'Just another day. And don't tell me what they cost now. When I gave up years ago, I think they were about a fiver.'

'You can double that... and more.'

'I bet.'

'Eighty-two fifty seven please, Bob.'

'Jeez, they must be a fortune now right enough.' Their eyes meet briefly. Lovely blue eyes. He's a lucky man, your man. Bob pays and hefts the bag.

'See you tomorrow, Annie.'

'Have a great day, Bob.'

'You too.' Sweetheart.

At his desk, Bob studies the routine he had written out the night before. 7.30am: rise, ablutions. 8am: writing. 9am: breakfast, shop. 10am: writing. He looks at the clock. 10.35am. 11am: tea break. Thirty odd minutes out already. Not even 11 o'clock. That would be the self-abuse. How did that take thirty minutes? More like three minutes, then thirty minutes of trawling crap on Twitter. A few minutes swapping texts with the three people who deigned acknowledge the day. He reads his scribbles from earlier that morning. Garbage. Just keep going. Get something on the page. Anything. For Christ's sake.

1pm: Lunch. Bob eats with Elton John's Sixty Years On playing on repeat. Bought that in first or second year. Before Wully, and his Yes and Genesis albums. Was a few years old even then, 1970? '71? Makes it fifty years old. 'You won't be listening to that rubbish fifty years from now, Bobby,' Mother had said. Nearly believed her. How many days in fifty years? Three hundred and sixty-five times fifty. Too difficult. Okay. That's the same as one hundred and eighty-two-and-a-half times one hundred. So, that's one hundred-and-eighty-two-and-a-half thousand days. No. Eighteen-thousand-two-hundred-and-fifty days. Roughly. That was murder. Would have done that in a flash, back in the day. Eighteen thousand days and what's to show for it? A flat in a decent enough side of the tracks. A pension that'll just about keep food on the table. Okay. Enough. Enough.

4pm: Writing. At his desk, Bob studies the packet of cigarettes, turning the pack over in his hands, examining every side. Meant to look elegant. Like a gold brick. High class. In the old

days. Now with a photo of a rotting, festering mouth on the pack. So graphic you can almost smell its rancid stench. He throws the pack into the wastepaper basket. What time's it?
3pm: Writing. Fuck it. Go for a walk. Get the creative juices flowing.

9pm: Relax. He cracks the plastic seal open on the bottle of malt. Pulls the stopper out with a creaky pop. The amber liquid splashes into the heavy crystal glass and the peaty aroma tickles his nostrils. He raises the glass to his nose and inhales deeply, eyes closed in quiet, contented satisfaction. Alan Maclean. First taste had been with Alan. "You get two drams of this. Then it's the cheap stuff. A blend from then on. You'll stop appreciating the malt after the first couple. Take it for granted. Disrespect it. You don't get pissed on this stuff. Slainte!" He smiles. The smile fades. Knew it was bad news when the text arrived. Unknown number. 'Is that you Bob? This is Rhiannon, Alan's daughter.' Another good man down. He raises his glass. 'Here's to you, Alan my friend. Slainte!'

Now to the stash. What'll it be tonight? It Ain't Half Hot Mum? Fawlty Towers? Love Thy Neighbour? No. No. Only the genius of Pemberton, Shearsmith and Gatiss will do tonight. 'Allo, Dave?' 'You're maah wife naaow!'

He loads the player with the little silver disc. Settles back in the armchair with his whisky and lights a cigarette. He sips the whisky. Been a good day? What's been achieved today? Nothing much really. Routine went out the window early-ish. Defenestrated. Prague. Defenestration. More than their erse oot the windae. At least there IS a routine now. Do better tomorrow. Don't stay up too late. Don't finish the bottle. Don't care what day it is. And don't fall asleep in the chair. Some Benny Hill on YouTube before bed. If it's not been taken down. Amazed it hasn't been. Bob presses play.

9.45am: Shop.

'You're looking a bit rough today, Bob,' says Annie, scanning his items.

'Aye, late night.'

'Oh, dear.'

Looking fine again this morning Annie. Did you get it last night? Sleeping pissed in the chair and you're at it. Sleeping pissed alone. Alone. 'Got a bit carried away, with the malt. Late night.'

'Carried away eh?' Annie winks.

'I wish.' Oh, that was cheeky! Maybe didn't get it after all. And what's she going to do? Close up shop for a session in the storeroom? Daft bastard. Bobby boy. Boaby. 'Was supposed to be a new routine today, well yesterday too.'

'Like a new year resolution?'

'Something like that.'

'I always break them.'

'Me too.'

'You look tired. Go home and go to bed.'

I will if you will. Coming?

'Have a nap.'

'I'm already behind today.'

'Why's that?'

Self-abuse. Again. 'Someone called. Couldn't get them off the phone.'

'Never mind. You can start again tomorrow. Anything else?'

Fuck it.

'A bottle of Dewar's. And twenty Benson and Hedges please, Annie.'

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