

Locked In

‘And does this new man o yours even like Sushi, Lisa?’

‘He would literally eat anything—if it meant getting his hole.’

Baith o them erupt intae laughter. Carol doubles ower as Lisa covers her dodgy teeth wi the tips o her fingers. They staund silently shaking, gasping in sooks o air. They’re still in bits as they finish folding the bed sheets under ma useless legs again—aw nice n snug like. Am pure giggling too, for the first time in a lang time. It disnae show, though—nithin diz—nae since the night that Ah tried tae end it aw.

Carol and Lisa are the twa student nurses that come intae ma daughter Stacie’s hoose these days tae help oot. Being a senior nurse ower at the hozzy, Stacie hiz a pick o the young lassies—girls she feels she can mentor in some way. Maistly they perform the mundane: pittin in ma eyedrops, dabbin mi doon wi a warm clot, shooglin mi aroon so that ah dinna get bedsores—aw that kinda shite. Ah’ll nae lie tae ye, it can be affa embarrassing haeing young quines in about ma bitties. Especially fan Am auld enough tae be their grandad, ken?

‘Toenails or teeth?’ Carol asks, holding up clippers in one haund and a toothbrush in the other.

‘Teeth!’ Lisa demands, snatchin the brush fae her haund pronto.

She pokes it in ma gob like a spoon in about a frozen ice cream tub.

‘Hoy, gently,’ goes Carol, peering up fae the end o the bed, ‘ye dinna want his gums tae bleed.’ She maks a wee circular motion wi her clippers. ‘Imagine that yer polishing a rock.’

Lisa hovers her haund ower ma privates. ‘Ah can think o a rock that needs polishing.’

‘Christ’s sakes, yer insatiable,’ Carol says, rollin her eyes. ‘Save it for yer man later, eh. Poor fucker.’

Am nae sure if the last bitty relates tae me, or Lisa’s new lad.

‘Aw, grumpy Carol. Ye dinna mind, do ye, Archie?’

‘It’s Mr. Gibson, tae you,’ Carol reminds her, nae looking up fae ma lifeless, mannequin feet.

Lisa gives ma piece a playful squeeze ower the bed sheet, then leans in so close so that Ah can practically taste the Embassy Regal—ma old brand.

‘Wid ye like that, Mr. Gibson—a sexual awakening?’

Ah’d like that very much Am thinking, very much indeed. The problem Ah hiv is that ma wires are aw fucked. Ma EEG in the hozzy showed ‘severe cerebral dysfunction’—nae cognitive signs. As far as abody is concerned, Am braindead—a lump o flesh and bone. Maybe they hidnae plugged their wee machine intae the wall that day though cause they said Ah hid lost ‘all conscious processing,’ Thing is, Ah can feel the blood circling ma body; Ah can see and hear others; Ah can understand

them—but can Ah wiggle a toe or lift a pinky finger...can Ah fuck. The only thing that moves on mi now is ma eyelids, and even they're sair fae blinking dot dot dot, dash dash dash, dot dot fucking dot every day for the last year. Ah can ainly see fit's straight ahead o mi; everything else remains oota shot; aff camera. Naebody's wise tae the fact that Am trapped—locked in a body wi nae movement and nae hope. It's living hell, ken. Pure torture.

Suddenly Lisa startles back, raising her haunds like she's touched the hotplate at the Chinese rezzy. 'I think ye hid better come see this,' she says.

Carol gathers the nail clippings fae the edge o the bed and rises tae her feet. They baith observe ma package in awe.

'Ah only touched it for a second, honestly,' Lisa whispers. 'Ah didnae realise he could get; you know...hard.' She looks doon at her haund as though it's worked a miracle. 'It's impressive, it staundin tae attention like that though, eh?'

'Christ Lisa,' Carol says, 'Fit hiv ye gone and done now?'

Stacie hiz came hame early fae her shift on the ward. Lisa and Carol, perfectly framed at the end o the bed, are getting the once-ower.

'So, fit one o you's raised the Titanic then?'

'We wernae deein much, Ah tell ye that' Carol says. 'Just our usual chores. I mean, it's nae like Mr. Gibson even realises that we're here, is it? Maybe, ye ken, the *urge* built up ower time?' She huds up a cotton bud in her haund for effect. 'Like earwax.'

'That may be the case, Carol, but fan you two are in this room, be professional. We dinna want tae be giving ma poor dad a heart attack on top o the full paralysis now, do wi? Cool it wi the Pamela Anderson routine, okay?'

'Fa's Pamela Anderson?' Lisa asks.

'Yon quine wi the massive knockers,' Carol informs her as the doorbell goes.

'It's nae important,' Stacie says, pattin doon the front o her scrubs. 'That will be the Dr. Mann.' She floats a look o concern in ma direction. 'Try nae molest him while Ah get the door, girls.'

Ah feel like Malcolm McDowell in *A Clockwork Orange* as the Doc huds ma eyelids open, one at a time. He shines a wee light, many times the power o oower celestial Sun directly intae ma eyeballs—the ainly things that *dee* work on mi. Am howlin wi pain, but much like Sigourney Weaver in ooter space, naebody can hear mi scream.

'It's perfectly natural. I have seen paraplegics exhibit signs of sexual arousal in the past,' he says. 'The male libido is indomitable. It has a mind of its own, I guess.'

He looks a little flustered wi himself for saying it, then starts tae look pure chuffed as he turns awa fae her, nae doobt reimagining himself as James Bond, Roger Moore era.

Ma neurosurgeon, an English chap, Dr Mann, seems mair o an expert in a glib turn of phrase than he is at studying folks heids. He certainly must be blind if he cannae see that Am alive underneath aw these wires, tubes and hopeless bones.

‘Try not to torture yourself. It’s natural to wish that he were in there somewhere, but I’m afraid that the electroencephalogram was conclusive. These so-called signs of life are just residuals of the body.’ He looks at her fighting back the tears. ‘You’ve taken on a lot by keeping him at home here, with so little help.’

‘Well, fa else cud look efter him better than his ain daughter, eh?’

The Doc hiz an answer but huds his tongue. ‘I’m sorry, but I must dash. I’ve another patient to see at 3 o clock.’

Stacie startles as though awakening fae a dwam. ‘Thanks for making it ower so quickly, Doctor Mann. Sorry if ah’ve wasted yer time.’

‘Not at all,’ he says, clipping his bag shut. ‘After all these years, I think we can dispense with the formality outside of hospital hours. It’s Francis, please.’

Ah can hear Lisa and Carol workin awa super quietly, pretending nae tae be lugging in, as they lug in like fuck.

‘Sure, Francis. Okay then.’

‘You are the best nurse we have at the infirmary, Stacie. If there’s anything else that you wish to discuss, anything at all, just get in touch.’

The Doc gies her a wee hopeful nod then heads oot the door and doon the stairs. The girls keep quiet for as long as they can before Lisa explodes.

‘Oh ma gawd, he literally *loves* you, Nurse Gibson! Ah totally would if Ah wiz you, by the way. That English accent...fuck me. Major DILF alert.’

Lisa gies Carol a suggestive wink. Carol rolls her tongue in her cheek. Stacie grimaces at them baith.

‘Minging acronyms aside, Dr. Mann...’

‘Francis.’

‘Thank you, Carol. *Francis* is jist a colleague o mine. Our relationship hiz aywiz bin professional. Ah’d like it tae remain that way.’

‘Aye sure Mrs. Gibson,’ Lisa says, elbowing intae Carol, giggling like mad.

Stacie pulls a superking fae her pack and rolls it under her nose until they hud their wheesht and staund gawpin. ‘Gaspin are ye girls?’ She lets them suffer a few moments more, ‘Go on, piss aff, the baith o yiz. See yiz the morns morn.’

Without a word, they scoop up their jaickets pronto and set about clattering doon the stairs.

Stacie shouts after them: ‘And dinna be late, ma mither’s coming.’

The hoose shakes on its foundations as the front door slams shut. Ye can hear them baith sparking up their smokes in the street, yappin awa tae each other. Stacie staunds by the windae, listening intently til their voices trail awa tae nothing. She rests doon on the edge o the bed and lights up, using the space in-between ma legs tae balance the wee ceramic ashtray.

‘Oh Dad,’ she goes, the words merely hitching a lift on a lang, smoke-filled sigh. ‘Fit we gonna dee wi ye?’

This is about the time fan wi usually hae een o oower wee conversations. Stacie says that Ah hiv become the world’s greatest listener. If only she knew that Ah spik back tae her n aw.

She kicks aff her clogs and taks a hud o the picture frame on ma bedside cabinet—me and her oan Aiberdeen beach, many moons ago, fan she wiz jist a bairn. In the photay, she’s clutching a jelly mould bucket overflowin wi sand as Ah hud her proudly in ma arms. We baith squint at the camera as Ah shelter her tiny, fragile body fae the howling wind.

‘Ye were a good Dad tae me.’

Am still yer dad, darlin.

‘But nae much o a husband tae Mum.’

Ah loved ye *baith*.

‘Too busy wi the bookie’s pen, Ah s’pose, eh?’

It’s nae that simple, quine.

‘If there wiz only a wy for us tae spik again.’

Dot dot dot, dash dash dash, dot dot dot.

She crushes doon the half-smoked fag intae the ashtray. Ah wince at the wastefulness. Am choking for a ciggy masel.

‘Ye ken dad, Ah hid tae sacrifice everything after you and Mum split up. Mum’s midlife crisis, breakdown or fitever. It seemed tae last firever.’

She gazes up at the wee skylight above ower heids.

‘Ten years, Jesus. Mithers shouldnae depend oan their daughters.’ She hangs her head low, like it hid bin a death sentence. ‘Ah hid loads of potential, but Ah could nivver accomplish onything wi her aroon. Nivver settled down, nae kids, Ah feel like a failure. Nout wrong wi fit Ah dee but Ah could hiv gan further than nursing ye ken. Could hiv bin a doctor maybe. Ye nae think, Dad?’

Aye, ye could that, lass, Ah think. Twenty years ago, fan Stacie graduated wi honors fae Aiberdeen Uni, wi were affa proud. Me and Stacie’s mum, Mary, hid a richt greet fan she got up on stage tae collect her degree. Ah mind her blowing us a big kiss then almost tripping ower her robes. The entire gaff wiz laughing—but laughing wi her, if ye ken fit Ah mean.

It wiz the same trip that Ah tried pizza for the first time, in the wee Italian rezzy by the Toonhoose. Stacie and Mary started pure windin mi up and calling me

Mario, something that Stacie continues tae dee nearly twa decades later. In Scotland ye see, nicknames are like mud—they stick.

It wisnae lang efter that things went wrang for me and Mary though. Ah wiz aywiz awa working the fishin boats. Twa wiks at a time battlin the North Sea meant that faniver Ah got hame Ah wid go oan the swally, ken. I loved tae launch aw that hard-earned dosh doon ma throat. The gambling and the booze were ma vices—ma heavy load— and they crushed mi. Mary hid plenty excuse tae chuck mi oot the hoose by the end.

‘Mum will be here eh morn. Finally hae the three o us in the same room again, eh? First time you guys will hae spoke in, fit, twenty years? Nae that you’ll be spickin much, Dad.’

Wi that she staunds up, weary kind, and heads oot the room. Ah listen tae her plod doon the stairs. Fit Stacie doesnae ken, is that the last time me and Mary spoke wisnae twenty years ago. It wiz the night that Ah took a heider aff the bridge.

It’s Friday mornin and the hoose is full o hustle and bustle. Ah can hear abody aff camera as they fold linen, open and shut drawers, and generally gie the gaff a wee spruce, ken. Carol is bletherin tae Lisa aboot a conspiracy theory involvin Princess Diana, a £20 bank note, and the Great Pyramid of Giza.

‘So, will she look the same? Ah mean, fan she gets aff the spaceship? Like, will she hiv aged?’ Lisa demands tae ken.

‘Doobt it,’ goes Carol, ‘Ye see, ye age super slowly, travelling at the speed o light.’

‘Good for her,’ Lisa says, squaring a pile of magazines. ‘Girl power.’

Stacie hiz heard enough ‘Right Lisa, ower here. Where’s the comb? Let’s make Mr. Gibson look nice and handsome for his visitor.’ She comes roon the side o the bed and dabs the corner o ma gob wi a cloot, ‘We can do this, Dad. Ah’ll be right by yer side’

‘That’s her here, folks’ Carol announces, peeking aroon the pinch pleat curtain.

Stacie claps her hands like a fitba manager. ‘Right, battle stations at the ready.’

Mary’s voice fae doonstairs is like hearing an auld record, one wi a shrill, repetitive hook. Ah can hear a ‘yid best pit those in water right awa’ and a ‘ye look affa tired Stacie; are ye nae sleeping quine?’

Their painfully slow ascent tae the top o the stairs seems tae take an eternity.

‘He’s in the Master bedroom, but it’s affa tight for space. In ye go, Mum. He winna bite, that’s for sure.’

Mary creeps roon the doorframe, as though she's just paid entry tae see the Elephant Man. She hiz aged a lifetime in the last twa decades. The once dyed Lucozade orange hair, now a door matte grey, her features drawn in close, pinched and serious. She looks like she's aboot tae tape a couple o pound coins tae a bairn's birthday card—serious Supergran vibes.

'Christ alive, he looks terrible.'

'Fit did you expect Mum, Cary Grant?'

'Ah think he suits a side parting,' Lisa says, thumbing the tortoiseshell comb.

'Ah dunno fit Ah expected. It's like seeing a ghost.'

'You'd ken, Mum. Yer as pale as een yersel.'

'And he disnae move at all?' Mary asks, sounding hopeful almost.

'Just the eyelids, Mum.'

Mary stoops right ower, looking intae mi like Am trapped doon a well. It's a surprise in itsel as maist folk cannae stand tae look intae ma eyes. It's like somehow, the paralysis will pit a curse on them n aw.

That's the wy Mary, keep looking. Am doon here, in the dark. She looks as though she's awa tae say something, but then thinks better o it.

'Aye, well.' she sniffs, 'nivver seen him so quiet, that's fir sure.'

'Is there onything else you'd like us tae do today, Mrs. Gibson?' Carol asks.

'No girls. You's have a nice weekend. Nae mischief, mind!'

The girls waste nae time boostin doon the stairs and oot the door, the Richter scale registering again. Stacie lights up twa ciggies and haunds een tae Mary. They staund in silence for a while, looking mi up n doon as ma ventilator wheezes—like it's got a sixty a day habit of its ain.

'We need tae decide fit wi dee, Mum. Ah canna go on looking efter him down here while you hide awa fae it aw. It's no fair.'

'Dinna talk tae me aboot fair. Onywy, Ah hiv bin busy wi work.'

She pouts out an impressive smoke ring that floats past ma heid, then aff camera.

'Am sure the chippy wid survive a weekend withoot ye, Mum. It's bin ower a year now since his fall, but this is the first time ye hiv bin in tae see him.'

'It wisnae a fall; he jumped.'

'Fall, jump, either wy Am struggling tae keep this aw going. Lisa and Carol are costing me a pretty penny as it is.'

'Fitever happened tae the auld wifey ye hud in? Fit wiz her name again?'

'Oh Mrs. Cruickshank? Annie Wilkes mair like.'

'Annie Fa?'

Stacie points ower tae the wee pile o books on her nightstand. Ah dinna need tae see it tae know: Stephen King: *Misery*. We wid aywiz read the scary ones tae Stacie. Even as bairn she loved em. The bloodier the better.

Mary grins in recognition; ‘Might hae tae take yon Mrs. Cruickshank back if we cannae afford the young lassies eh, Mario.’

DOT DOT DOT, DASH DASH DASH, DOT DOT DOT.

‘Mario!’ Stacie says wi a big childish grin. ‘Far did that come fae again?’

‘Cah even mind now darlin. So much hiz bin lost tae time. One thing’s for sure: yer too young to gie up the rest o yer life looking efter him.’

‘Am almost forty-two, Mum. And onyway, nae everyone is prepared tae throw people they love oot ontae the street.’

‘Fit ye trying to say, Stacie? That Ah abandoned your father? He wiz an alcoholic darling; Ah hiv got the scars tae prove it.’

‘Am sorry, Ah didnae mean...’

‘If he wants tae jump aff Union Terrace bridge then that’s up tae him. We shouldnae hae tae deal wi it.’

Stacie’s hackles finally rise; ‘*You’re* nae dealing with it at all; *I’m* dealing with it because he’s *my* dad and *I* love him.’ She paralyzes her ciggy intae the ashtray. ‘Ah canna live wi the thought o him up on the bridge that night, aw alone. Fit must hiv bin gan through his heid? If ainly he hid felt that he could hiv picked up the phone. Maybe, if ah hid bin closer tae hame, or we had spoken mair the last few years. Ah dunno. Aw Ah ken is that Ah canna abandon him. Nae again, Mum.’

As Stacie folds intae Mary’s arms, sobbing, Ah lay wishin that Ah cud jist gie her a great big hug. Ah start tae cry, but nae tears come. They never do, nae onymair.

Mary sits tae the side o mi, aff camera, reading her book. Ah can see in the reflection o the mirrored wardrobe doors that she’s lost tae the world o Annie Wilkes and her murderous mind. She hiz bin here a few nights and doesnae seem like she’s in much o a rush tae leave. Stacie clicks intae the room in her skivvies n heels, huddin up twa dresses.

‘Fit een, Mum, red or black? Ah cannae decide.’

‘Am nae sure—ye will look dead gorjis in either darlin.’

‘C’mon, he’ll be here ony minute.’

‘Red,’ they agree, in perfect synchronicity.

Stacie stands in front o the mirror, pitting the dress oan as Mary comes roon the side o the bed and adjusts the straps for her.

‘Ah hope this neurosurgeon isnae just using ye for yer money, Stacie?’

‘Good een, Mum. Am nae sure about him yet; he seems keen, but he’s pretty flash.’

‘Flash is great,’ Mary says; ‘we cud aw use a little flash in our lives—or a big een.’

Stacie throws a silk scarf aroon her shudders. ‘So, fit ye think?’

‘Stunnin. Even fan ye sit doon, you’ll be stunnin.’

They smile at each other as a car horn beeps in the street.

‘Right Mum, that’s me. Ony problems, ye can get me oan ma work pager.

‘Ye hiv already talked me through it, love.’

‘Aye, right, sorry. Am really glad yiv decided tae stay oan a few mair days, ye ken? Haeing us aw the gether again means a lot.’

‘Ah’ll mak sure Ah dinna stay ten years this time. G’wa and hae some fun lass.’

Mary looks at mi solemnly: ‘We’ll no wait up for ye,’ she says.

‘NIGHT DAD.’ Stacie shouts, beaming back at us like she’s awa tae senior prom.

We baith listen tae her get intae the Doc’s motor outside. It feels just like the old days: me and Mary the gether, our wee girl gan oot for the night. The fear and the worry never leaves ye. Even neurosurgeons can be careless drivers. Mary gets tae her feet and closes the bedroom door gently—like an assassin. She staunds in the lang shadows o the gloaming light, adding nurse Ratched vibes tae the Supergran eens fae before.

‘So, Sting. Bin sendin oot an SOS tae the world hiv ye?’

My blood runs aw cauld the second she says it.

‘Mind that Ah wiz married tae a fisherman for twenty years—you! Ah ken morse code fan Ah see it.’

She kens. She kens but she’s no said onything tae onyone. The fuck? She must be here tae finish me aff Am thinking.

‘Ah thought Ah telt ye on the phone that night that if ye were gonna jump, then tae dee it properly, nae leave yersel like...this. Can ye nae dee nithin right, Archie? Ye seem determined tae ruin Stacie’s life now, is that it? Just like ye did mine eh?’

The night that Ah jumped, Ah hid stumbled fae the Grill Bar on Union Street. Their staff, in an apparent act o solidarity wi ma landlord from earlier in the day, had chucked me oot on the street. Ah hidnae a penny in ma pocket and naebody tae turn tae. Mary’s wiz a number Ah nivver rung, but that night Ah was so lonely. Ah hud called tae apologise, tae really apologise once and for aw. She hud started tearing intae mi though, reminding mi o how worthless Ah wiz, how Ah hud almost hud her in the loony bin wi ma behaviour. Ah says tae her that Ah wid be better aff deid then—that Ah should jump aff the bridge and that wid be that. She didnae try tae stop mi. ‘Dee it,’ she said. ‘You’ll be deein us aw a favour.’ It wiz the last words she said tae mi afore she hung up, and Ah went doon.

‘Is it nae aboot time ye let us aw move on, Archie? Stacie deserves tae settle doon and be happy ye no think?’

She moves ower the top o mi and begins studying ma wires and tubes, a bomb disposal expert searching for the right wire tae snip. Ah hiv got ma eyes shut tight now, thinking this is the end; she's mad; she aywiz wiz.

'Ony last words, Archie?' she whispers.

Ah open ma eyes and she locks ontae them. Ah blink her one last message:

-.. --- / .. - / -... .. - -.

She takes a few seconds tae translate the dots and dashes intae words. Ah see her lips mooth the words: 'DO-IT-BITCH'

Ah feel a tear run doon ma cheek, ma second sign o life in less than a wik. Mary smirks, holding the cord tae ma ventilator in her haund like she's awa tae pull a Christmas cracker wi herself. Suddenly she tightens the connection in front o ma eyes, wriggles aff the bed, then flattens oot ma sheets.

'On second thoughts, that wid be a bitty too easy, Archie.' she says. 'Ah think that Ah will keep ye locked in. For a little while longer, at least.'

She wipes the tear off ma cheek wi her thumb, then sticks it in her gob.

'That's one bitter tear Archie Gibson. Now, cry me a million more.'