

Wytin

Ah idolised ma da. It wis ayewis jist him an me on matchday, spangin ben ess same street on the wye te Pittodrie, me rinnin te keep up, ma wee han in his big een.

The thocht aat Ah hidna spoken te ma da fir months is like a scurl Ah canna stop pickin. There'd bin naethin wrang, nae big faa-oot. Ah'd bocht him an iPad, bit he cudna get the hang o't, an he got ower deaf te phone...an Ah'm a selfish shite.

An noo it's ower late...

Ah'm gaun te use his concession fir fit's left o the season – Ah'm a kick in the erse fae retirin age, an Ah dinna spose onybody at the gate ivver checks.

“Fuck's sake!” Scurry's shite spleeters doon the front of ma jaicket.

Ah pull a paper hunkie oota ma pooch an gie it a dicht. It's spost te bi lucky...

There's a spit in the air as Ah waak doon Seaforth Road, by the Trinity Kirkyaird, an Ah'm at Pittodrie wi a puckle meenits te spare. Ah gie the statue o Fergie a nod fir ma da, haud roon te Merkland Lane, clunk throwe the turnstile an jyne the steer o ither hopefu sowels. Ah dinna need a pee, bit there's aye a great muckle queue at hauf-time, so Ah ging onywye.

Aat's the rain on noo. Ah pit a step in an fin Da's seat.

The stans are full an the hale place is buzzin. The Dons wis Da's life. He wis a legend in the Sooth Stand an he hairdly missed a match. Fin he cud aye hear on the phone, he eesed te tell ma aa about the folk at the fitba: Suntie wi the lang fite beard, Sweery Sammy, an some boy caaed Big Mac.

“Ye see aas muckle o them,” said Da, “they're jist like faimly – some o them's great te spik till...ithers are a pain in the erse.”

Ah canna see Suntie, bit there's a baldie-heidit boy in front o ma aat micht bi Big Mac. He's like a brick shitehouse; the rolls on the back o his neck leuk like they're tryin te aet his tattoo, an his lugs meeve up an doon as he chaas his chuddie. He's wi a wee wifie wi sticky-up hair an a hackit smoker's face aat leuks like she cud sort him oot, easy.

There's nae sign o ma loon – iv he disna nip on he'll miss the kick-aff. It's his first time back at the fitba wioot his Granda; he's mebbe nae wintin te spik te folk...or it's mebbe me he's avoidin.

Ah raik aboot in ma pooch an fin a pandrop te crunch.

Still nae Stevie an here's the teams comin oota the tunnel. Wi're aa on wir feet an clappin, an there's a boorachie o bairns doon at the front blaain their Aiberdeen-brandit tooteroos. The smatterin o scurries on the Main Stand reef tak fleg an heid fir the beach as the announcer comes boomin ower the spikker system, hypin aabody up wi his usual pre-match spiel.

The teams line up an shak hans. The ref flips a coin. Wi must'v won the toss – wi're playin oota the Merkland eyn.

The fussle blaas.

The Ultras in the Red Shed stairt singin wi a flurry o flags an the bang o a drum. There's a fyow decent passes an the support crunk up the volume. Wi're ten meenits in fin Ah see Stevie comin hashin in aboot. Aabody his te stan up te lut him in.

“Sit doon, fir fuck’s sake!”

Sweery Sammy must bi at ma back.

“Foo’s it gaun, lad?” Ah shoogle up a bittie.

“Aye, nae bad, like.” He staps his scarf into his jaicket an pulls his collar up roon his chin.

Ma wee loon’s middle-aged. There’s lines aroon his een, his hair’s gaun grey, an he’s his mither’s spit.

Wi sit nae leukin at een anither – the hame truths fae the day o the funeral hingin hivvy ower us...

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“Ye shid o bin here fin granda dee’d, Da.” Stevie hid bin fuelled bi the drams aat follaed the sannies an sassage rolls. “He’d plinty o visitors in the hospital, bit it wis aye you he wis leukin fir.”

“He gid doonhill quick, tho, eh? Ah thocht Ah hid time.”

“Bit Granda *didna* hae time, Da. Ah ken he wis unreal fir his age, despite the fags, bit he wis aul – really aul.”

“Ah jist thocht he’d ayewis bi aroon.”

“Ach, weel – it winna bi the first thing ye’ve missed,” said Stevie, his vyce wis ticht wi resintmint. “Fin Ah wis little, ye wis ayewis late or nae turnin up at aa. An aiven fin ye wis at hame ye wis awa deen yer ain thing.” He gid ma wi a glower an pourt himsel anither voddie. “An Ah thocht fin ye teen early retiremint aat ye’d get a hoose in Aiberdeen – nae Cyprus, fir God’s sake!”

“An I thocht Ah’d spen the rest o ma days wi yer mam, Stevie,” Ah said, leukin fir an excuse. “Bit she hid ither ideas. There wis naethin here fir ma.”

“Wi wis here, Da...” Stevie leukit like a kid aat’s wheels hid cam aff his cairtie.

“Weel, Ah’m here noo.” Ah swallaed ma shame wi a gulp o waarm Tennent’s. “An Ah’m nae gaun naewye.”

“Wi’ll see,” said Stevie, sounin like he *didna* believe a wurd.

“Foo’s yer mam?” Ah speirt, anxious te chynge the subjeck.

“She’s happy.”

“Wi aat Brian?”

“Brian’s sound,” said Stevie.

Ah wintit te say Brian’s a prick. Sleepin wi my Suz. In a hoose aat Ah’ve pyed fir. Bit Ah *didna*.

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“Shift up een,” says Stevie wioot turnin roon. “There’s a crack in Granda’s seat an he ayewis meeves iv Suntie disna show up.”

Ah dinna ken iv it’s true or no, bit Ah dee fit Ah’m telt; the impty reed plastic cheir like a chasm atween us.

The mannie aside ma’s blootered – he keeps leanin ower an riftin lager into ma face. He’s gettin on ma wick ariddy, bit Ah bide far Ah am.

Thirty meenits in an the game’s shite. There’s a rummlin undercurrent o quait despair; folk’s girnin, reddin their throats an unwrappin sweeties.

“Ah’m awa fir a singil fish,” says the boy aat’s bleezin te naebody in particular. Aabody tits an huffs as he squeezes by.

The Ultras try te gee things up wi a bit o ‘Stand Free’, bit it peters oot bi the secont time throwe.

“Aiberdeen’s nae makkin naethin o’t,” says Stevie, shakkin his heid, “wi’re jist faain back on wir usual hoofball tactics.”

There’s a fyow sclaffed shots, an a wee bittie o excitemint fin a baa misses bi a mile an lans on the Main Stand’s mossy reef. It rolls aff, nearly duntin the opposition’s manager on the napper.

Ah flech aboot in ma seat – ma erse is dottled an ma hip’s giein ma jip.

A coorse tackle taks a player doon an it’s nae een o oors. The crowd finally fin somethin te cheer aboot. The stretcher-bearers hover like vultures, bit the physio gies the boy’s leg a bit rub an a scoot o the magic spray an waves them awa; they scuttle back te their neuk wi their heids doon.

The fourth official hauds up a boord. Three meenits injury time.

There’s a fyow mair pathetic passes afore the hauf-time fussle blaas an the teams hochle aff te boos.

Wi stan up an Ah rub the feelin back inte ma legs.

“Far’s the ballboys?” Ah’m scrabblin aboot fir somethin te spik aboot.

“Fit?” Stevie souns irritatit.

“They eesed te ging roon the sidelines wi a widden boord wi the winnin tickets fir the hauf-time draa.”

“They hivna deen at since Covid, Da.” Stevie chaaes his boddom lip like he wints te say mair.

It’s spost te bi spring, bit the rain’s comin in sidewyes an the win’s rattlin ma ribs.

“Ah’v firgotten foo caal the Sooth Stand is.” Ah stump ma feet te get the heat up.

“Ye shid’v bade at hame, then,” mutters Stevie. “Nae sure fit ye’re deen here, onywye. The fitba wis ayewis me an Granda’s thing.”

“There’s nae need bi like aat, Stevie. Ah’m jist tryin te mak convirsation.”

“Calm doon, Dave.”

Ah hate it fin ma loon caaes ma Dave. Ah ken he’s deen it te rile ma, so Ah dinna rise till’t.

“Ah cud go a Pittodrie pie.” Ah fummle aboot in ma pooch an tak oot a tenner.

“It’s aa cashless noo, Da.”

“Here, then.” Ah han ower ma bunk caird.

“S’cuse me. Sorry. Sorry.” Stevie dis the sidewise shuffle ben the line o seats.

It’s bin a lang time since me an his mam splut up, bit he blames it aa on me.

Mairret really young cos wi’d hid till – Suz said wi’d growne apairt an gid ma aat line: “Ah luv ye, bit Ah’m nae in luv wi ye.”

Ah’d wintit te say, “I luv you, tho.” Bit Ah wintit her te bi happy, so Ah said it wis the same fir me.

It is aa my wyte, tho...

The ile industry wis boomin in Aiberdeen, an the lure o a better life sookit ma in. Ah queued up fir ma hard hat an steel taecaps – a willin volunteer.

Siddenly, wi'd siller te live an nae jist survive. Peer Suz wis left wi it aa te dee. An fin Ah wis at hame, Ah wis still awa – rinnin about the toon like Billy Big Baas, firgettin fa Ah wis an fit Ah hid – makkin the maist o ma free time an full waallet afore Ah wis back on the dreadit chopper an heidin oot te the Forties fir anither fortnicht in the North Sea.

“Gie’s a han, wull ye!” Stevie’s comin back deein a balancin act. “Ah’m nae a bloody octopus.”

“Thanks, lad.”

“Cheers.” He slides ma caird inte ma pooch an hans ower a coffee an a pie in a wee cardboord tray.

“Fit’s ma grankids up till iday?” The paper cup’s fine an waarm an Ah’v te blaa on the het pie.

“Jen’s wi her mam – she’d te tak her te some gymnastics thing, an Aaron’s awa up the toon wi his boyfriend. Him an Jason met at the college.”

“Ah winner fit yer Granda wid’v hid te say about aat?”

“Naethin – he’d a lotta time fir Jason.” Stevie’s face tells ma aat Ah dinna ken ma ain faimly. “They baith eesed te swing in by wi his fish supper ilky Wednesday, wioot fail.”

Ah wish Ah’d keepit ma moo shut.

Hauf-time’s takkin firivver. Ah’m leukin at the tunnel willin the players te come back oot so wi can stop spikkin – aathin Ah say seems te piss Stevie aff. The boy aat’s steamin hisna cam back fae the lavvies, so aat’s a bonus. Ah tak oot ma mobile an stairt scrollin.

“There’s nivver ony signal at hauf time.” Stevie tells ma ess like it’s somethin Ah shid ken. “The hale warld’s on their phone.”

The Dandies appear oota the tunnel. Aabody boos them back onte the pitch – the Aiberdeen fans’ ain brand o pep talk.

“Get yer fingir oot!” Sweery Sammy’s mate jynes in wi the verbals.

Wi sit doon again as the secont-hauf kicks aff. Weel-worn advice is comin fae aa directions. It’s like ma da’s here – king o the fitba cliche.

“Dinna bi feart o the baa!”

“Switch it!”

“Ye’re gaun the wrang wye.”

“Dinna keep it te yersel.”

“Haud it up the park!”

The game rummles on wi ower mony stray passes aat miss bi a mile an a fyow unimpressive attempts at goal. Oor players leuk like they canna bi ersed, an the manager’s baalin an pyntin, duncin about the touchline like he’s gaun te blaa a gasket.

A pass finally meets its man. C’mon, boys! Aat’s mair like it. The action on the pitch speeds up. Oor winger taks harin doon the left-han side. It’s aa set up an ye can see it comin...

“GOAL!” Aabody’s on their feet. “Aib-er-deen! Aib-er-deen! Aib-er-deen!” The place is rockin – a riot o reed an fite. “The sheep...the sheep...the sheep are on fire!”

Oor hans is in the air an Stevie an me's hingin on te een anither – an ma hairt's singin, an it's nae jist wi the goal.

Haud on, tho. The ref's pittin his fingir te his lug an the crood deflates like a burst baa. Stevie stiffens, gies ma an aakward clap on the back an pulls awa. Heid aifter heid turns te leuk at the LED screen ahin us.

VAR check in progress. Possible Offside.

“Nae fuckin doot!” Sweery Sammy roars in ma lug an a shooer o slivvers lans on ma jaicket.

VAR finally pits aabody oota their misery an announces wi're affside. Aabody gings radge.

Sweery Sammy stairts up again: “Dirty, cheatin Glesga bastard!”

Ah'm nae sure foo he kens far the ref's fae, bit Ah think aat's jist the go-to insult in ess pairts.

“Affside!” Stevie pits his heid in his hans as wi sit doon. “Must'v bin bi a baa hair.”

Wi waatch as the game hirples te the final fussle. Nil Nil.

The mood's as flat as a bannock.

“Ah hivna missed ess feelin,” Ah say as wi file oot wi aa the ither scunnert support.

“It's the hope aat kills ye.” Stevie spits the wirds oot an it souns like an accusation.

“Fancy a pint?” Ah'm zippin up ma jaicket an poppin a puckle Rennies. “Aat pie's made ma dry.”

“Cud dee.” Stevie shrugs.

The Pittodrie Bar's hoachin – there's nae seats an aabody's stannin shooder te shooder. Some'dy's fartit an it's absolutely rotten.

Ah turn an han Stevie his pint.

“Shite game,” he says, his face sinkin into the glaiss.

“Aye, shite. Ah hate aat bloody VAR. *Nil Nil*. It's like waatchin a porno wioot the money shot.”

“Jesus, Dad!”

“Bit it's like yer granda ayewis said,” Ah ignore the leuk o disgust on Stevie's face an keep spikkin, “Aifter it's aa by, Ah'm nae up nor doon about it...it disna pit ony siller in my pooch.”

“Bet he wis ragin really, tho, eh?” There's a first hint o a smile fae Stevie.

“Aye – it wis bullshit – ye canna kid a kidder.”

Stevie's een full an wi baith leuk awa.

“Ye comin back te the hoose?” Ah try nae te soun desperate.

“Canna.” Stevie studies his sheen. “Ah'v plans.”

Ah nod. Ma pint's siddenly flat.

Wi leave the bar an stan wi wir heids doon aginst the win.

“There's ayewis the neist game, eh?” Ah scuff ma feet on the pavemint. “Aye anither chunce.”

Wi baith ken Ah'm nae spikkin about the fitba onymair.

“Nae sure fit Ah'm deein, Da – Ah'v a lot on ivnoo. An Ah dinna think Ah'll get anither season's – mebbe jist get a ticket fir the odd match.”

“Aye, good plan.” It’s like a kick in the knackers. “Ah cud mebbe meet up wi ye?”

“Ah dinna ken.”

“Ah thocht wi wis gettin on...”

“It’ll tak mair than a pie an a pint te mak things richt, Da.”

“Ah ken, Stevie...bit Ah wint te try.”

“Lut’s jist see foo it goes.” Stevie waaks awa up King Street. He disna leuk back.

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The hoose is stinkin – aifter I meeved oot, Da hid cam aff the back step an teen his smokin inside.

Ah sit doon in Da’s aul cheir. There’s a great rivver o a hole in ae airm an a fag burn in the ither. The rug aneth ma feet’s worn an stewy.

The boddom flat Ah wis brocht up in hisna chynged at aa – aathin’s shades o broon an the waas are yallaed wi rick. Iv Ah’m gaun te bide here, the hale place’ll need guttin.

Ah tak a photie album fae the paper rack. The first fyow pages are aa o me as a baby wi a mither aat ainly exists in stories. There wis naethin comin ower ma, tho – Da lut ma aff wi murder, an fin ye’v a deid mam yer grunnies spyle ye aiven mair. Mebbe aat’s fit’s adee wi ma noo...

There’s snaps o faimly days oot, Christmas denners, an a fadit Polaroid o me an Da in wir biler suits. Ah’m aa lang hair an sideburns an wi’v jist stairtit wirkin thegither – anither generation o plumbers.

Bit Ah hidna wintit te spen ma days wi ma hans doon some wifie’s U-bend, ma bodie buggert wi a lifetime o craalin aboot on ma hans an knees.

There’s a couple o pages at the back wi cuttins fae the P&J aboot the Chinook crash an the Piper Alpha. Da aye wirriet mair aifter aat, an it got waar fin Ah stairtit wirkin hine fae hame fir months at a time.

An Ah ken noo, iv Ah cud hae ma life again, Ah’d dee it aa differint.

Ah div wint te be a better da...an a granda tee...iv Ah can jist hing in there...

Ma phone dirls. A message fae Stevie. The sun comes oot. Disappears.

Busy this next wee while. CU sometime.

Ony fantasies aboot the future rin doon the drain. Ah sigh, like a dug’s toy wi the squeaker rippit oot. Ah tap oot a reply: *Nae bother. You ken far I am. Spik soon hopefully?*

An syne Ah’m bubblin an greetin. Ah wint ma da. Ah cud’v bin here seener. Shid’v. Didna.

Guilt seeps throwe ma an canna fin a road oot.

Dad hid sut here wytin fir me te waak throwe the door, bit Ah left it ower late. Stevie an his mam hid wytit, feelin like they didna maitter. An Ah’v twa granbairns aat hairdly ken ma.

The ile an gas’s teen awa far mair than it ivver gid ma. An fit’v Ah got left te show fir it aa? Ah’v bin swicked. The mair ye mak, the mair ye spen, an there wis nae wye oot – stuck in ma life like a waasp in a winda.

An Ah wish Ah believed in somethin...believed Ah’d see ma Da again te mak things richt. Bit Ah dinna. Fin ye’re deid ye’re deid.

The widchipped waas close in aroon ma an the reef presses doon on ma heid.

The wee side-table's stained wi an Olympic set o coffee cup rings. There's a hauf-teem bottle o Gordon's an a bachled paper bug fae the chemist; Ah pick it up an the erse faas oot o't, hauf burst blister-packs skitterin onte the fleer.

Ah tak a swig o gin an leuk doon at da's peels – Ah cud neck the lot, bit Ah dinna wint Stevie te feel like ess...dinna wint him thinkin it wis the hope aat killt his da.

Ah check ma phone. *Message read.* Nae reply. Ah doot it's my turn te wyte...