

Spiders

“When did you get so fat?” she’d asked with a cheeky smirk on her face.

“Thanks,” I’d replied. “For your information I’m not fat. I’m just going through a period of expansion. Like Apple.”

“Really? More like GM Apple then?”

She had a point. I had ballooned. Not to bursting point. Not to the stage where I needed machinery to get me out of bed or a small car to move around. I could still see all my bits and bobs. My clothes weren’t ordered on-line at sizenormous.com. None of that. I’d just developed a bit of a belly, quite a bit. There had been a time when my stomach was as flat as the line of the horizon viewed from a remote beach. That view had been uninterrupted. It was perfectly flat and no extra flab. Now, it was being spoiled by something poking up from underneath the sands. Something large. A mound you could call it. Or perhaps it was one of those mines from World War 2: the spiky ones that still popped up when least expected. Or the top of a church dome from an ancient lost city. Just how had I managed to swallow that?

I had let myself go but it wasn’t entirely unjustified. It had been a stressful time for me and my appetite. My dad had been in and out of hospital. Tests. Admissions. Keeping him in for longer. MRSA. He’s out but not right. All that kind of thing. I lived so far away that I couldn’t just travel up at the drop of a hat. When I did go and see him he was so full of chemicals that he hardly recognised me or anyone else. He seemed to be drifting around on a cloud of confusion. His mind hitched itself to random points. He’d told me that he’d been talking to Jamie Spence about the moon landing but I knew that old Jamie had been dead for years now, electrocuted by an unlucky combination of a metal tooth filling and faulty door in WH Smiths in Elgin. He’d seemed so sure about Jamie, just as he was sure about the large black wolf he swore he’d seen prowling the hospital wards.

“It’s looking for Maternity,” he’d whispered, looking over his shoulder just in case it was listening. “It can’t read the signs but they’re wily beasts, it won’t be long before it works out how to use the lifts. Once it catches the scent of the nappies it’ll be in there like a fox in a chicken coup. Those poor bairns.”

Another time he’d insisted that the man in the next bed had levitated all the way up to the ceiling and got stuck on a light fitting. He was up there for hours. The nurses had been frantically looking for him. They thought that he’d escaped and was heading out into the community in a partially clothed manner. They never thought to check the ceilings. My dad had tried to tell them but couldn’t get the words out. He’d pointed vigorously in the direction of the ceiling but the nurses hadn’t taken him seriously and wandered off muttering something about seeing God and lost marbles. They had been totally flummoxed when the man reappeared in his bed. An almighty sneeze had broken him free of the sticky fitting. He’d crashed back down into his own bed, silently and with the minimum of fuss and had dropped back off to sleep. The whole episode had tickled my Dad no end.

Thankfully, he did have some brief moments of lucidity. He’d always been ready with a kind word. One time when the clouds that passed over his eyes had cleared, revealing the sharp blue hew that had looked at me countless times as I’d grown up, he’d looked me straight in the eyes and said, “You’ve fairly porked out. What’s she been feeding you?” I’d almost cried with happiness. In that moment he was back to his old self but when I looked at him again the clouds had rolled back in and he was staring off into the distance.

I would leave the hospital even more concerned. Omens appeared. Angry black clouds splattered ink blots across the skies. Crows sprouted through the slated roofs like some weird beaked crop. There was always a faint burning smell, source unknown. I felt an invisible weight pressing me into the ground.

Those crows bothered me. I started seeing them everywhere. I'd open the curtains in the morning and they'd be hopping around my front garden. While out and about I'd sense something watching and turn around to see one of those dark cloaked peepers perched on an overhead wire, its cold grey eye blinking mechanically like a camera shutter.

The whole situation was making me worryingly hungry. Especially at night. Around about nine o'clock. My mind would start stumbling around the situation and I'd reach for the multi bags of crisps and the family sized chocolate bars.

"I'll try and do a bit of walking," I'd said to her. I stumbled on a route where I could arrive at work at the same time as usual by getting off the bus in the middle of nowhere and cutting down the footpath which followed a single track road before branching off through a farm track which slipped under the motorway. When it popped up on the other side I was within spitting distance of my office. It was a good couple of miles walk. It wouldn't be long until those extra pounds were slipping away like melted butter off hot toast.

Surprisingly, this early morning walk soon became the highlight of my otherwise dull and predictable working day. I was outside for one thing, not corralled together in pens with the other office based livestock. Being outside was a revelation. Why hadn't I gone outside more often? The air was cold and fresh. The sun was up in the sky beaming out its wondrous shadows across the fields. The sky was clear and sharp. Clouds appeared, moved in one direction, changed colour then disappeared. Hidden birds sang their strange songs to a secret audience. I could feel the sun's warmth on my pale complexion. The sensation was oddly stimulating, like a double shot cappuccino with chocolate sprinkles.

Of course, there was always something to spoil the tranquillity. The purple Mazda two door that screeched down the narrow road each morning at an unbelievable pelt. The bus driver that positioned himself so close to the kerb that I had to lean at forty five degrees to avoid being clubbed into the next life by his side mirrors. The lines of buzzing overhead

cables, held aloft by huge angular towers that reminded me of alien giants waiting for the signal to attack.

Spoilers aside, I arrived at work oddly energised. Some days I even managed to do some actual work. I'd been under the impression that exercising made you tired. I wondered how many other things I was wrong about. I weighed myself religiously every night. Nothing changed. I even tried taking my socks off. I was exactly the same weight I had been before I started my gruelling body fitness regime. I'd thought that the fat stores would be draining away to a distant memory but apparently they were still slopping around inside me like a personal slush-puppy machine on slow stir. I started walking a bit faster. I could feel my blood flooding around my body. My temples thumped. My lungs strained. This was more like it. I was making my puny body do some work at last. I was in charge. I was showing myself who was boss. I had to undo the top button off my shirt. The miles were speeding past. Everything was speeding past. The sky was spinning. I was falling. I needed to stop. I dangled over a crash barrier and vomited my Weetabix and banana from the motorway flyover, scatter splattering a white van bound for an unknown homer. I felt better for it. Apart from the spear in my side that signalled the first stitch I'd had since trying to run cross-country at school.

Then I remembered why I'd given up exercising in the first place. No pain no gain. Some moron with oversized muscles and an undersized brain had said that. Feeling awful meant I must be doing something right. Right? I began to wonder if there was an easier way. A miracle cure for my burgeoning blubbiness.

I watched a program about liposuction. Was that really the answer? No thanks. It was the most gruesome thing I'd ever seen. I watched the gory bits from behind a cushion, the sound turned down low so that I didn't hear the slicing incisions. Self-mutilation as a shortcut

to getting thinner just didn't sit well with my delicate disposition. I was scared enough about getting pointy shoes.

I'd stared at them in Clark's window. There they were. They just stood there. Footless and fancy free. Two tone. Black and white. The dogs. Class and classic. I wanted them. I pictured myself slipping my feet into the soft leather. They were snug, firm but not too tight. Perfect. I had flashes of Cinderella. I was sure they'd make me a happier person. I noticed how pointy they were. The dream was gone. Replaced by a nightmare. The tightness of their pointiness squashed my toes together. They started to fuse. I was left with a single toe. In the morning it was a claw. A hideous hooked nail of a thing, just hanging there at the end of my foot. It clicked on the wooden floor as I stalked awkwardly forward to switch off the television. The prize promised by those pouting, preening princes had percolated into a potent poison that was going to run riot through my personals. Where one foot went the other was sure to follow. Then it would be the hands. They'd become nothing but gnarled talons on little stumpy arms. Next the teeth. One big tooth I'd be left with. How can you eat chocolate when you're a sabre-tooth? It was a question that shouldn't need to be asked. I forgot about the pointy shoes. They were an impossible dream. There was nothing else for it, I'd just need to keep on walking. And that's what I did.

The walking was making me extra hungry in the mornings. I took snacks. Bars of chocolate, bags of mini-cheddars, nuts, the chocolate ones, that sort of thing. I didn't want to get stranded in the middle of nowhere with nothing to ease the famishment. I'd have been useless if it had come to catching my own food. I'd not manage to outrun anything, single toed or not. Nothing bigger than a caterpillar anyway. I didn't think that they'd be all that tasty. As for something more substantial, a rabbit say, well I did see a few, near the farm track. They were pretty tame, loitering at the edge of the path, nibbling on bits of grass and twitching their noses like they were aching for a sneeze that never quite materialized. I was

pretty sure that if I'd been sneaky about it I could have pounced on one or hit it over the head with a rock. Then what? I was hardly going to sink my teeth into it. I was hankering for a bite but I wasn't totally depraved.

It was one morning, while wrestling with the chubby little devil that sat on my shoulder, who was busy whispering something about how tasty the red berries overhanging the farm track were, that I noticed it. Just over the fence. Lying there on its own. I glanced at it, looked away, then turned and went back for a better view. I knew what it was: a leg. What I didn't know was what it had belonged to.

It wasn't a person's leg, of that much I was sure. For one thing, it was too long, around six feet at a guess. It was thin, no more than four or five inches wide at the knee and there was no foot, it just came to a point. It could have lost its foot but there didn't look like there was any gristle down there. It wasn't an animal's leg, not one that I knew of. Obviously it wasn't a rabbit's. I tutted at myself for even going there. A cow would have had more meat on it, wouldn't it? Could it have been a horse's leg? I didn't think so. It was too long, too thin too pointy at the end and the lucky horseshoe certainly hadn't worked. It looked kind of spindly, like it wouldn't take too much weight on it. Then there was the colour. It was a weird grey colour that held a ghostly sheen. I stared at it and hurt my brain thinking where it could have come from. I was shaken from my thoughts by my phone ringing.

My heart sank, the display said it was my sister.

Dad?

“Hello,” I said. “Is everything alright?”

“He's back in the hospital, he collapsed at the house during the adverts of Coronation Street.”

“Is he conscious?”

“He is now. I’ll go in and see him this morning. Apparently he told the nurses that they should look out for a wolf dressed as a doctor.”

“Good advice. Should I come?”

“I’ll let you know later. What are you up to?”

“I’m on my way to work, walking, trying to do a bit of exercise.”

“Good, you need it. You don’t want to keep going up sizes. It’ll cost you a fortune in work trousers.”

“True. Okay, let me know how he’s doing when you see him.”

“Right, bye.”

I couldn’t bring myself to tell her I was standing on a farm track pondering an abandoned appendage from an unidentified creature. She had enough on her plate. I took a photo of the leg on my phone and carried on to work.

I had a troubled night. I was half in half out of sleep. I kept seeing a large grey eye, blinking. It was right there in front of me, so close I could hear the sound of the eyelid sliding across the eye. It sounded like a faint swish. The eye was cold and unfeeling, a shark’s eye. Or a crow’s. I’d drop off to sleep and there was my dad, lying in bed, looking frightened and alone. The skin on his face was so thin that I could see through to his skeleton. His cheekbones were lined with spindly black trails that looked like little weeds growing from his bones. A jagged line of yellowing teeth clung to his jaw. He was staring at something, his eyes wide and full of terror. I could hear its low growl and the slow pad of its footfalls getting louder. There was a shadow. It was looming closer. I woke up with a weight on my heart. I opened the curtains and there they were: the crows. They’d been up to something in the garden. There was a pile of feathers that weren’t black. Something had got it.

That day I wasn’t firing on all cylinders during my walk. The bus driver came within an inch of his goal, his wing mirror was so close to my head that he clipped my ear. The sky

was heavy with bleak clouds fit to burst and someone had turned up the volume on those overhead cable towers. They were buzzing with a whine of static that had scared off the birds completely. There was no sign of my invisible winged choir and no sound from them either.

I walked down the track past the farm. I looked out over the farm buildings. They were a rag-tag collection of low huts separated by narrow paths. There were small pens surrounded by high fences and a brick building with large doors and a high chimney poking up. There was a faint wisp of smoke drifting casually from its top. I didn't have to look too far before I spotted a crow. It was up ahead, balancing on an overhead cable like an odd midget high-wire act.

That's when I saw them. I stopped dead and gulped in a huge mouthful of air.

"What the ..." I said out loud.

For a moment I thought I must still be dreaming. I stared at the back of my hand for a while, then used it to slap myself across the cheek.

"Ouch!" I was certainly awake. That didn't make me feel any better. In a jagged line all the way down the sloping ground next to the high barbed boundary fence which bound the farm were legs. Just like the one I'd seen before. Except this time there were hundreds of them. They lay there in the field like match sticks discarded by the gods. They were silent and motionless. None had got across the fence.

"I'm losing it," I said to myself. I checked my palms for hair. None. Yet.

That night I thought I'd broche the subject with herself. After all it was at least partially her fault that I'd found myself on that farm track in the first place. If she hadn't been so body image obsessed then maybe she'd have been happier living with a chubbinator in the first place.

"Legs?" she bellowed as I told her. "What do you mean, legs?"

"Legs. You know what they are don't you? The bits your feet hang off."

“Funny. Are you sure they were legs and not something else?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, branches off a tree. Bits of a fence that had blown over. No?”

“They weren’t wooden legs.”

“That could be it. Prosthetics. There might have been an accident. A lorry full of them crashed shedding its load. They ended up in the field, carried off by birds or foxes.”

“Hardly. Anyway, they weren’t human legs.”

“What then, aliens?”

“Settle down.”

“Look, I know you’re worrying about your dad. We all are and you’re not sleeping well. That doesn’t help. I can see you’re not yourself. I mean you’ve put on a ton of weight, haven’t you?”

“You’re at it again. I have not put on weight.”

“Have you weighed yourself? Well, have you?”

“Okay. I’ve put on a few pounds. I don’t understand it though. I’ve been walking like a nomad’s apprentice. It’s not made a blind bit of difference.”

“You’re tired. Stressed out. You should go to the doctors and get something to help you sleep. Especially if you’re starting to see limbs.”

“I’ve got a photo, here on my phone.”

“You’ve been taking pictures of dead legs. That’s not good, not good at all.”

“There, take a look.”

“Are you sure that’s a leg? It looks like rope or a cable or something. Anyway, there’s only one.”

“I didn’t take a photo of them all. You’ll just have to believe me. There were hundreds.”

She stared at me, a look of concern plastered on her face.

It hadn't gone well. Trust her to quiz me on whether I'd been scales dodging. I decided to knock the walking on the head. It was back on the bus for me.

I hated getting the bus. Standing at bus-stops with the other losers. Cramming onto the smelly cabins like reluctant sardines. Other people's music – always awful. Grumpy drivers, wet seats and the high quotient of weirdos that always wanted to sit next to me. Like the guy that was squeezed in next to me on that first day back on the bus. He was actually touching my leg with his hand. He was groping my thigh. I was going to ... he was ... I didn't know what to do. I looked at him. He was far too close. He opened his mouth. Was he going to try and kiss me?

“Long time no see,” said the groper.

It was Billy MacRae.

“You're an idiot,” I replied. “I could have flung you through that window for feeling me up.”

“Thought you'd enjoy it. You used to.”

“Funny. Anyway, how did you know it was me?”

“I didn't at first. Didn't even look at you. Then I spotted your shoes, squared off at the toes. I thought to myself, weird. Took a look at your coupon and lo and behold if it isn't yourself. Haven't see you for ages, despite the fact that our paths just seem to keep crossing. I knew we'd bump into each other sooner or later.”

I sighed. I'd know Billy since school. Beamer was his nickname on account of his face lighting up like a traffic light at the slightest embarrassment. He'd moved to the city around the same time as I had and had ended up working in the building across from me. He was like some kind of weird shadow. I didn't even like him but he always seemed to be there or there about. What was it with people like him? Why were they there? Is there any reason

for it? We weren't close but we did know each other's story. He remembered me when I was freckle faced and rake shaped.

"I didn't recognise you there," he'd said. "You've put on a ton of weight."

"Thanks," I said.

"Is it a medical thing?" he asked.

"What'd you mean?"

"The extra padding, are you ill?"

"No, I'm not ill. I'm just, well, you know ..."

"What?"

"I've got things on my mind."

"You've got things on you bones. Sticking to them."

"Cheeky git."

"Call it like I see it, you know me. How's you Dad doing?"

"Not so good at the moment. He's in hospital. He's got problems with his insides."

"Right, sorry to hear that. He was always good to me when we were kids."

"Yeah. He's getting on a bit now."

"Aren't we all? You still working for that shower of chancers?"

"Still there."

"Blimey, not wonder you've bloated. That place is wall to wall fat-cats. You're coming out in sympathy with them. That's what's happening, isn't it?"

He was laughing at his own hilariousness. I just looked at him and rolled my eyes. I wondered just how big I was going to get. Would they even let me on the bus if I took up more than one seat?

"Swap numbers then," he said.

“Do we have to?” I thought. “Okay,” I said. I was sure it wasn’t a great idea. He’d be flooding my phone with jokes about dead celebrities and pictures of naked desperados in abnormal juxtapositions. We even got off at the same stop. He slapped me on the back and bounded over the road like a baby gazelle. I slouched through the revolving doors and headed straight for the canteen for the big breakfast deal.

I sat there, my head hung heavy over an unappetising fry up. My spirits had their hands in their pockets and were kicking an old cola can around the doldrums. My phone rang. My heart dropped like a piano down a stairwell, smashing itself into pieces. Dad. The display said ‘DAD’. He never phoned me, it must be someone else using his phone. I knew what had happened. I didn’t want to know. I was just about to press the button to answer when it went dead.

Everything stopped. I was sitting there in a deep silence, all around was moving in ultra-slow motion. I could hear the hands of my watch scraping across the face of time. I was sure he was gone. I shook my head and looked down at the cheap plastic plate. There were three sausages in the big breakfast deal and they had arranged themselves into the shape of an arrow. They were pointing out the window. It’s a sign, I thought. They’ll guide my eyes to something profound and meaningful: a beautiful coloured bird, a brilliant shining star, a sad eyed girl standing gazing at me, holding a bunch of red and yellow balloons. I’d know he was gone. I’d know he was at peace. I lifted my eyes in the direction of the sausage arrow.

There was no sign. No footprints across the sky. No glitter trail of the gods. Just lines and lines of boxy cars in the car park and the office building across the road, a grey, hollow cube indented with little rectangular windows, through one of which sat Billy McRae. The thought of his foolish face was an offensive addition to my moment of celestial revelation.

On the roof of his building something was moving. My head started to shake in involuntary disbelief at what my eyes were seeing. Something was up there. It was flitting

around the gable edges. I saw flashes of dark shapes dangling over the sides then disappearing only to reappear at the other end of the roof and vanish again. The morning sun glinted off the surface of something large and shiny which emerged for a moment next to the phone mast on the roof. Whatever it was, it was moving fast. I thought it must be the size of a small car, one of those Swatch affairs that you could park sideways or an old style Mini. I glowered in its general direction. My phone rang. I thought, Dad? The display said BillyMac. For the love of ...

I picked up.

“Have you seen them?” gasped Billy.

“Seen what?” I replied.

“They’re all over your building,” he said.

I looked back towards his building. I saw the dark mounds lined up behind the parapet on the roof.

“There’s something on the roof. At yours. I don’t know what they are ...” I said.

There was a moment’s silence before Billy said, “They’re trying to get in. They’re crawling down the walls outside but they can’t get through the little windows.”

Through the phone I heard the sound of glass smashing. Someone screamed. There was an awful rushing sound, like a stampede. It rolled louder. The sound of sudden chaos filled my head and then the phone crunched to silent. I looked over at Billy’s building. It was covered in them. They were swarming down the outer walls. People were jumping out of windows. A woman in a smart business suit and heels sprinted out of the main doors into the car park. A dark shape scuttled after her at an impossible speed. It fell across her and she disappeared. Moments later I could see it, skulking behind a white Fiat 500, its bulk overlapping the outline of the car.

I stood up, ready to run. It was too late, they were already in the canteen. The coffee queue had been decimated. Half of them probably never even looked up from their phones to see their oncoming doom. A table of girls from the call centre were being bundled up and rolled into the corner next to the vending machine by a tag team of two. One of the creatures had got itself jammed in the revolving door. That door was notorious. If you didn't have a valid pass you weren't getting in. One of the security guards loped towards the disabled toilet and locked himself in.

I squinted over my shoulder and out of the window. I peeked past the car park doing my best to blot out the carnage taking place amongst the numbered spaces. Up there, on the horizon where the distant hills sloped lazily down towards the flat-lands I could just make out the chimney from the farm. There was smoke snaking out of it. Grey smoke that looked like a poisonous stream sliding lazily towards the heavens. I knew then where they were coming from. I knew what they belonged to. Those legs.

My phone began to ring. I looked up. One of them was facing me across the rows of now empty tables. The display on the phone said: DAD.

It couldn't be him.

It darted towards me and stopped dead, sliding forward on the linoleum tiles. Its legs were long and skinny. They didn't look strong enough to carry its bulk but there were so many of them.

I pressed the button to answer and held the phone to my ear.

"Hello," I said.

"It's me," said the voice.

"Dad?"

"Yes, who did you think it was, God?"

"I didn't ... but you're ... are you alright?"

“Listen, I don’t have much time ...”

It was inching towards me. Its eyes were mirrored shades.

“There’s something I need to say,” he said.

“It doesn’t matter now,” I said.

“I’ve always been too hard on you. I’ve not got long. I just wanted to say it, so you know.”

“I know,” I could barely speak.

“I haven’t said ...” he said.

I could make out my own reflection in its eyes. I was the shape of a mirror ball. A big one.

“I hope you’ve always known, it’s not something I’d ever say,” he said.

It raised its sting above its head and crouched.

The phone reception crackled. There was a faint ghostly echo.

His voice sounded tiny, as if it had flown to a great height and called back down.

The voice said, “I love you”

The phone went dead.

My head tipped forward as I choked on my tears.

The darkness before me swam out of focus.

A shadow passed over my head.

There was the sound of breaking glass.

The sounds of my own breathing rushed through my head.

Slowly, I looked.

They’d gone from the canteen. They’d left one hell of a mess.

The call centre girls were hanging upside down from the ceiling, cocooned in candy-floss.

The disabled toilets were still locked.

The coffee queue had been ingested and taken off site.

I could see them out of the window.

They were heading off across the car park in the direction of the farm.

There were too many to count. Something was calling them back.

What had just happened?

Up above the chimney the smoke was melting into the air. The sunlight caught its dying embers and for a moment the whole sky danced with shimmering sparkles.

I stared at that sky, watching it fade. I held the image in my mind, storing it away, never to be forgotten.

When I think of it now, as then, my heart swells with love.